



THE COMPLETE GREEK TRAGEDIES

Edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore

VOLUME II

SOPHOCLES

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Oedipus the King

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Oedipus at Colonus

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Antigone

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Ajax, The Women of Trachis, Electra, Philoctetes

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INTRODUCTION

“*The Theban Plays*” by Sophocles

THIS series of plays, *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*, was written over a wide interval of years. The dating is only approximate, for reliable evidence is lacking; but the *Antigone* was produced in 441 B.C. when Sophocles was probably fifty-four, and *Oedipus the King* some fourteen or fifteen years later. *Oedipus at Colonus* was apparently produced the year after its author's death at the age of ninety in 405 B.C. Thus, although the three plays are concerned with the same legend, they were not conceived and executed at the same time and with a single purpose, as is the case with Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. We can here see how a story teased the imagination of Sophocles until it found its final expression. We can see the degrees of variation in treatment he gave the myth each time he handled it. And perhaps we can come to some notion of what the myths meant to Sophocles as raw material for the theater.

The internal dramatic dates of the three plays do not agree with the order of their composition. As far as the legend is concerned, the story runs in sequence. *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone*. But Sophocles wrote them in the order: *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*. In view of this and the long interval between the composition of the individual plays, we would expect some inconsistencies between the three versions. And there are fairly serious inconsistencies—in facts, for instance. At the conclusion of *Oedipus the King*, Creon is in undisputed authority after the removal of Oedipus. Though he appeals to him to look after his daughters, Oedipus refrains from asking Creon to do anything for his sons, who, he says, will be all right on their own (OK 1460). It is Creon who will succeed Oedipus in Thebes, and there is no question of any

legitimate claim of Oedipus' descendants (OK 1418). But in *Antigone*, Creon tells the chorus that he has favorably observed their loyalty first to Oedipus and then to his sons, and so has hope of their devotion to himself. In *Oedipus at Colonus*—the last of the three plays he wrote—Sophocles makes one of his very few clumsy efforts to patch the discrepancies together. In *Oedipus at Colonus* (ll 367 ff.), Ismene says that *at first* the two sons were willing to leave the throne to Creon in view of their fatal family heritage, but after a while they decided to take over the monarchy and the quarrel was only between themselves as to who should succeed. At this point Creon has vanished out of the picture altogether! Again, the responsibility for the decision to expel Oedipus from Thebes and keep him out rests, in *Oedipus the King*, entirely with Creon, who announces that he will consult Apollo in the matter. In *Oedipus at Colonus* his sons' guilt in condemning their father to exile is one of the bitterest counts in Oedipus' indictment of them (OC 1360 ff.). These are important differences. We do not know anything really certain about the manner of publication of the plays after their production. We know even less about Sophocles' treatment of his own scripts. Maybe he simply did not bother to keep them after he saw them as far as the stage, though that seems unlikely. Or it is possible and likelier that Sophocles, as he wrote the last play in extreme old age and in what seems to be the characteristic self-absorption of the last years of his life, cared little about whether *Oedipus at Colonus* exactly tallied, in its presentation, with the stories he had written thirty-seven and twenty-two years earlier.

Let us for the moment disregard the details of the story and concentrate on what would seem to be the central theme of the first two plays in order of composition. And here we find something very curious. Most critics have felt the significance of the *Antigone* to lie in the opposition of Creon and Antigone and all that this opposition represents. It is thus a play about something quite different from *Oedipus the King*. And yet what a remarkable similarity there is in the dilemma of Creon in *Antigone* and Oedipus himself in the first Oedipus play. In both of them a king has taken a decision which is disobeyed or questioned by his subjects. In both, the ruler mis-

construes the role of the rebel and his own as a sovereign. In both, he has a crucial encounter with the priest Teiresias, who warns him that the forces of religion are against him. In both, he charges that the priest has been suborned. There the resemblance ends; for, after abusing the old prophet, Creon is overcome with fear of his authority and, too late, tries to undo his mistake. In *Oedipus the King* the king defies all assaults upon his decision until the deadly self-knowledge which starts to work in him has accomplished its course and he is convicted out of his own mouth

Usually, as we know, the *Antigone* is interpreted entirely as the conflict between Creon and Antigone. It has often been regarded as the classical statement of the struggle between the law of the individual conscience and the central power of the state. Unquestionably, these issues are inherent in the play. Unquestionably, even, Sophocles would understand the modern way of seeing his play, for the issue of the opposition of the individual and the state was sufficiently present to his mind to make this significant for him. But can the parallelism between the position of Oedipus in the one play and Creon in the other be quite irrelevant to the interpretation of the two? And is it not very striking that such a large share of the *Antigone* should be devoted to the conclusion of the conflict, as far as Creon is concerned, and to the destruction of his human happiness?

What I would suggest is this: that Sophocles had at the time of writing the first play (in 442 B.C.) a theme in mind which centered in the Theban trilogy. One might express it by saying that it is the story of a ruler who makes a mistaken decision, though in good faith, and who then finds himself opposed in a fashion which he misunderstands and which induces him to persist in his mistake. (This story is later on going to be that of a man who breaks divine law without realizing that he is doing so, and whose destruction is then brought about by the voice of the divine law in society.) Between the *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, the theme has developed further, for in the latter play Sophocles is showing how the ruler who breaks the divine law may, for all he can see and understand, be entirely innocent, but nonetheless his guilt is an objective fact. In the third play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, this issue reaches its final statement. The

old Oedipus is admittedly a kind of monster. Wherever he comes, people shrink from him. Yet his guilt carries with it some sort of innocence on which God will set his seal. For the old man is both cursed and blessed. The god gives him an extraordinary end, and the last place of his mortal habitation is blessed forever

What this interpretation would mean, if correct, is that Sophocles started to write about the Theban legend, the story of Oedipus and his children, without having fully understood what he wanted to say about it. He may have been, and probably was, drawn, unknown to himself, to the dramatization of this particular legend because in it lay the material of the greatest theme of his later artistic life. But first he tried his hand at it in the opposition of Creon and Antigone. However, even while he did this, the character of Creon and his role in the play were shaping what was to be the decisive turn in the story he was going to write—the Oedipus saga.

Thus there is a certain elasticity in the entire treatment of myth. The author will accent a certain character at one time to suit a play and change the accent to suit another. Or he may even discover the same theme in a different myth. This is suggested by a short comparison of the *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, both written in the last few years of Sophocles' life. The figure of Philoctetes, though occurring in a totally different legend from Oedipus, is a twin child with Oedipus in Sophocles' dramatic imagination.¹ In both these plays, the *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the hero is a man whose value is inextricably coupled with his offensive quality. Philoctetes is the archer whose bow will overcome Troy. He is also the creature whose stinking infested wound moves everyone to disgust who has to do with him. Oedipus is accursed in the sight of all men; he had committed the two crimes, parricide and incest, which rendered him an outcast in any human society. But he is also the one to whom, at his end, God will give the marks of his favor, and the place where he is last seen on earth will be lucky and blessed. This combination of the evil and the good is too marked, in these two plays, to be accidental. It is surely the idea which inspired the old Sophocles for his two last plays. There is, however, an important further development of the theme in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. For there in Oedipus'

mind the rational innocence—the fact that he had committed the offenses unknowingly—is, for him at least, important in God's final justification of him. Sophocles is declaring that the sin of Oedipus is real, that the consequences in the form of the loneliness, neglect, and suffering of the years of wandering are inevitable, but that the will and the consciousness are also some measure of man's sin—and when the sinner sinned necessarily and unwittingly, his suffering can be compensation enough for his guilt. He may at the end be blessed and a blessing. This is not the same doctrine as that of Aeschylus, when he asserts that through suffering comes wisdom. Nor is it the Christian doctrine of a man purified by suffering as by fire. Oedipus in his contact with Creon, in his interview with Polyneices shows himself as bitter, sudden in anger, and implacable as ever. He is indeed a monstrous old man. But at the last, he is, in a measure, *vindicated*. Yet in *Philoctetes* the theme of the union of the offensive and the beneficial, which in *Oedipus at Colonus* becomes the curse and the blessing, is seen without the addition of conscious innocence and unconscious guilt. Can we say that Sophocles finally felt that the consciousness of innocence in Oedipus is the balancing factor in the story? That in this sense *Oedipus at Colonus* is the further step beyond *Philoctetes* in the clarification of the dramatic subject which occupied the very old author? Or that the consciousness of innocence when linked with objective guilt is only the human shield against the cruelty of the irrational—that Oedipus is meaningful in his combination of guilt and innocence as a manifestation of God and of destiny and that his explanation of his conscious innocence is only the poor human inadequate explanation? Everyone will answer this according to his own choice. But, clearly, the theme of *Philoctetes* and the theme of the old Oedipus are connected. /

If an analysis such as this has importance, it is to show the relation of Sophocles to the raw material of his plays—the myth. It is to show the maturing of a theme in Sophocles' mind and his successive treatments of it in the same and different legends. In the Oedipus story it is a certain fundamental situation which becomes significant for Sophocles, and the characters are altered to suit the story. Creon in the first, Oedipus in the second, are examples of the same sort of

dilemma, even though the dilemma of Creon in the *Antigone* is incidental to the main emphasis of the play, which is on Antigone. But the dilemma was to be much more fruitful for Sophocles as a writer and thinker than the plain issue between Antigone and Creon. The dilemma resolves itself in the last play at the end of Sophocles' life into the dramatic statement of a principle, of the union of the blessed and the cursed, of the just and the unjust, and sometimes (not always) of the consciously innocent and the unconsciously guilty. The fact that Sophocles could in two successive treatments of the play fifteen years apart switch the parts of Creon and Oedipus indicates that neither the moral color of the characters nor even their identity was absolutely fixed in his mind. The same conclusion is borne out by the great similarity between the *Philoctetes* and the *Oedipus at Colonus*. Sophocles in his last days was incessantly thinking of the man who is blessed and cursed. For the theater he became once the lame castaway Philoctetes, who yet, in virtue of his archery, is to be the conqueror of Troy; in the next play he is Oedipus, who sinned against the order of human society but is still to be the blessing of Athens and the patron saint of Colonus. It is the theme and not the man that matters. Consequently, it is the kernel of the legend, as he saw it for the moment, that is sacred for Sophocles, not the identification of all the characters in a certain relation to one another. True, he has treated the Oedipus story three times in his life, which means that the Oedipus story had a certain fascination for him—that somehow hidden in it he knew there was what he wanted to say. But he did not have to think of the whole story and the interdependence of its characters when he made his changes each time. One stage of the theme borne by the hero is given to a character in a totally different myth. The sequence is Creon, Oedipus, Philoctetes, Oedipus. It may seem absurd to link Creon, the obvious form of tyrant (as conceived by the Athenians), and Philoctetes. But it is the progression we should notice. The tyrant who with true and good intentions orders what is wrong, morally and religiously, is crudely represented in Creon, he is much more subtly represented in Oedipus himself in the next play. But the similarity of the situation and the nature of the opposition to him proves how generically the

character is conceived. You can switch the labels, and Creon becomes Oedipus. But if the character is generic, the situation is deepening. We are beginning to understand *why* a certain sort of tyrant may be a tyrant and in a shadowy way how conscious and unconscious guilt are related. In the *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus* the situation is being seen in its last stages. We are no longer concerned with how Philoctetes came to sin or how Oedipus is the author of his own ruin. But only how does it feel to be an object both of disgust and of fear to your fellows, while you yourself are simultaneously aware of the injustice of your treatment and at last, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, of the objective proofs of God's favor.

For Sophocles the myth was the treatment of the generic aspect of human dilemmas. What he made of the myth in his plays was neither history nor the kind of dramatic creation represented by *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. Not history, for in no sense is the uniqueness of the event or the uniqueness of the character important; not drama in the Shakespearean sense, because Sophocles' figures do not have, as Shakespeare's do, the timeless and complete reality in themselves. Behind the figure of Oedipus or Creon stands the tyrant of the legend; and behind the tyrant of the legend, the meaning of all despotic authority. Behind the old Oedipus is the beggar and wanderer of the legend, and behind him the mysterious human combination of opposites—opposites in meaning and in fact. And so the character may fluctuate or the names may vary. It is the theme, the generic side of tragedy, which is important; it is there that the emphasis of the play rests.

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OEDIPUS
THE
KING

Translated by
DAVID GRENE



CHARACTERS

Oedipus, King of Thebes

Jocasta, His Wife

Creon, His Brother-in-Law

Teiresias, an Old Blind Prophet

A Priest

First Messenger

Second Messenger

A Herdsman

A Chorus of Old Men of Thebes

OEDIPUS THE KING

SCENE: *In front of the palace of Oedipus at Thebes. To the right of the stage near the altar stands the Priest with a crowd of children. Oedipus emerges from the central door.*

Oedipus

Children, young sons and daughters of old Cadmus,
why do you sit here with your suppliant crowns?
The town is heavy with a mingled burden
of sounds and smells, of groans and hymns and incense;
I did not think it fit that I should hear
of this from messengers but came myself,—
I Oedipus whom all men call the Great.

5

(He turns to the Priest.)

You're old and they are young; come, speak for them
What do you fear or want, that you sit here
suppliant? Indeed I'm willing to give all
that you may need; I would be very hard
should I not pity suppliants like these.

10

Priest

O ruler of my country, Oedipus,
you see our company around the altar,
you see our ages; some of us, like these,
who cannot yet fly far, and some of us
heavy with age; these children are the chosen
among the young, and I the priest of Zeus.
Within the market place sit others crowned
with suppliant garlands, at the double shrine
of Pallas and the temple where Ismenus
gives oracles by fire. King, you yourself
have seen our city reeling like a wreck
already; it can scarcely lift its prow
out of the depths, out of the bloody surf.

15

20

A blight is on the fruitful plants of the earth, 25
 A blight is on the cattle in the fields,
 a blight is on our women that no children
 are born to them; a God that carries fire,
 a deadly pestilence, is on our town,
 strikes us and spares not, and the house of Cadmus
 is emptied of its people while black Death
 grows rich in groaning and in lamentation 30
 We have not come as suppliants to this altar
 because we thought of you as of a God,
 but rather judging you the first of men
 in all the chances of this life and when
 we mortals have to do with more than man.
 You came and by your coming saved our city, 35
 freed us from tribute which we paid of old
 to the Sphinx, cruel singer This you did
 in virtue of no knowledge we could give you,
 in virtue of no teaching; it was God
 that aided you, men say, and you are held
 with God's assistance to have saved our lives.
 Now Oedipus, Greatest in all men's eyes, 40
 here falling at your feet we all entreat you,
 find us some strength for rescue.
 Perhaps you'll hear a wise word from some God,
 perhaps you will learn something from a man
 (for I have seen that for the skilled of practice
 the outcome of their counsels live the most). 45
 Noblest of men, go, and raise up our city,
 go,—and give heed. For now this land of ours
 calls you its savior since you saved it once.
 So, let us never speak about your reign
 as of a time when first our feet were set
 secure on high, but later fell to ruin. 50
 Raise up our city, save it and raise it up.
 Once you have brought us luck with happy omen;
 be no less now in fortune.

If you will rule this land, as now you rule it,
better to rule it full of men than empty. 55
For neither tower nor ship is anything
when empty, and none live in it together.

Oedipus

I pity you, children. You have come full of longing,
but I have known the story before you told it
only too well. I know you are all sick,
yet there is not one of you, sick though you are, 60
that is as sick as I myself.
Your several sorrows each have single scope
and touch but one of you. My spirit groans
for city and myself and you at once.
You have not roused me like a man from sleep; 65
know that I have given many tears to this,
gone many ways wandering in thought,
but as I thought I found only one remedy
and that I took. I sent Menoeceus' son
Creon, Jocasta's brother, to Apollo, 70
to his Pythian temple,
that he might learn there by what act or word
I could save this city. As I count the days,
it vexes me what ails him; he is gone
far longer than he needed for the journey. 75
But when he comes, then, may I prove a villain,
if I shall not do all the God commands.

Priest

Thanks for your gracious words. Your servants here
signal that Creon is this moment coming.

Oedipus

His face is bright. O holy Lord Apollo, 80
grant that his news too may be bright for us
and bring us safety.

Priest

It is happy news,
I think, for else his head would not be crowned
with sprigs of fruitful laurel.

Oedipus

We will know soon,
he's within hail. Lord Creon, my good brother,
what is the word you bring us from the God?

85

(Creon enters.)

Creon

A good word,—for things hard to bear themselves
if in the final issue all is well
I count complete good fortune.

Oedipus

What do you mean?
What you have said so far
leaves me uncertain whether to trust or fear.

90

Creon

If you will hear my news before these others
I am ready to speak, or else to go within.

Oedipus

Speak it to all;
the grief I bear, I bear it more for these
than for my own heart.

Creon

I will tell you, then,
what I heard from the God.
King Phoebus in plain words commanded us
to drive out a pollution from our land,
pollution grown ingrained within the land;
drive it out, said the God, not cherish it,
till it's past cure.

95

Oedipus

What is the rite
of purification? How shall it be done?

Creon

By banishing a man, or expiation
of blood by blood, since it is murder guilt
which holds our city in this destroying storm.

Oedipus

Who is this man whose fate the God pronounces?

Creon

My Lord, before you piloted the state
we had a king called Laius.

Oedipus

I know of him by hearsay. I have not seen him.

Creon

The God commanded clearly: let some one
punish with force this dead man's murderers.

Oedipus

Where are they in the world? Where would a trace
of this old crime be found? It would be hard
to guess where.

Creon

The clue is in this land;
that which is sought is found;
the unheeded thing escapes:
so said the God.

Oedipus

Was it at home,
or in the country that death came upon him,
or in another country travelling?

Creon

He went, he said himself, upon an embassy,
but never returned when he set out from home.

Oedipus

Was there no messenger, no fellow traveller
who knew what happened? Such a one might tell
something of use.

Creon

They were all killed save one. He fled in terror
and he could tell us nothing in clear terms
of what he knew, nothing, but one thing only.

Oedipus

What was it?

120

If we could even find a slum beginning
in which to hope, we might discover much.

Creon

This man said that the robbers they encountered
were many and the hands that did the murder
were many; it was no man's single power.

Oedipus

How could a robber dare a deed like this
were he not helped with money from the city,
money and treachery?

125

Creon

That indeed was thought.

But Laius was dead and in our trouble
there was none to help.

Oedipus

What trouble was so great to hinder you
inquiring out the murder of your king?

Creon

The riddling Sphinx induced us to neglect
mysterious crimes and rather seek solution
of troubles at our feet.

130

Oedipus

I will bring this to light again. King Phoebus
fittingly took this care about the dead,
and you too fittingly.

And justly you will see in me an ally,
a champion of my country and the God.
For when I drive pollution from the land

135

I will not serve a distant friend's advantage,
but act in my own interest. Whoever
he was that killed the king may readily
wish to dispatch me with his murderous hand;
so helping the dead king I help myself.

Come, children, take your suppliant boughs and go;
up from the altars now. Call the assembly
and let it meet upon the understanding
that I'll do everything. God will decide
whether we prosper or remain in sorrow.

Priest

Rise, children—it was this we came to seek,
which of himself the king now offers us
May Phoebus who gave us the oracle
come to our rescue and stay the plague

(Exeunt all but the Chorus.)

Chorus

Strophe

What is the sweet spoken word of God from the shrine of Pytho
rich in gold
that has come to glorious Thebes?
I am stretched on the rack of doubt, and terror and trembling
hold
my heart, O Delian Healer, and I worship full of fears
for what doom you will bring to pass, new or renewed in the
revolving years.
Speak to me, immortal voice,
child of golden Hope.

Antistrophe

First I call on you, Athene, deathless daughter of Zeus,
and Artemis, Earth Upholder,
who sits in the midst of the market place in the throne which
men call Fame,
and Phoebus, the Far Shooter, three averters of Fate,

come to us now, if ever before, when ruin rushed upon the state, 165
you drove destruction's flame away
out of our land.

Strophe

Our sorrows defy number;
all the ship's timbers are rotten;
taking of thought is no spear for the driving away of the plague. 170
There are no growing children in this famous land;
there are no women bearing the pangs of childbirth.
You may see them one with another, like birds swift on the
wing, 175
quicker than fire unmastered,
speeding away to the coast of the Western God.

Antistrophe

In the unnumbered deaths
of its people the city dies;
those children that are born lie dead on the naked earth
unpitied, spreading contagion of death; and grey haired mothers
and wives
everywhere stand at the altar's edge, suppliant, moaning; 182-85
the hymn to the healing God rings out but with it the wailing
voices are blended.
From these our sufferings grant us, O golden Daughter of Zeus,
glad-faced deliverance.

Strophe

There is no clash of brazen shields but our fight is with the War
God,
a War God ringed with the cries of men, a savage God who burns 191
us;
grant that he turn in racing course backwards out of our coun-
try's bounds
to the great palace of Amphitrite or where the waves of the 195
Thracian sea
deny the stranger safe anchorage.
Whatsoever escapes the night

at last the light of day revisits;
so smite the War God, Father Zeus,
beneath your thunderbolt,
for you are the Lord of the lightning, the lightning that
carries fire

Antistrophe

And your unconquered arrow shafts, winged by the golden
corded bow,
Lycean King, I beg to be at our side for help;
and the gleaming torches of Artemis with which she scours the
Lycean hills,
and I call on the God with the turban of gold, who gave his name
to this country of ours,
the Bacchic God with the wind flushed face,
Evian One, who travel
with the Maenad company,
combat the God that burns us
with your torch of pine,
for the God that is our enemy is a God unhonoured among the
Gods.

(Oedipus returns.)

Oedipus

For what you ask me—if you will hear my words,
and hearing welcome them and fight the plague,
you will find strength and lightening of your load.

Hark to me; what I say to you, I say
as one that is a stranger to the story
as stranger to the deed. For I would not
be far upon the track if I alone
were tracing it without a clue. But now,
since after all was finished, I became
a citizen among you, citizens—
now I proclaim to all the men of Thebes:
who so among you knows the murderer
by whose hand Laius, son of Labdacus,

died—I command him to tell everything
to me,—yes, though he fears himself to take the blame
on his own head, for bitter punishment
he shall have none, but leave this land unharmed.

Or if he knows the murderer, another, 230
a foreigner, still let him speak the truth.

For I will pay him and be grateful, too
But if you shall keep silence, if perhaps
some one of you, to shield a guilty friend,
or for his own sake shall reject my words—
hear what I shall do then: 235

I forbid that man, whoever he be, my land,
my land where I hold sovereignty and throne;
and I forbid any to welcome him
or cry him greeting or make him a sharer 240
in sacrifice or offering to the Gods,
or give him water for his hands to wash.

I command all to drive him from their homes,
since he is our pollution, as the oracle
of Pytho's God proclaimed him now to me.
So I stand forth a champion of the God
and of the man who died. 245

Upon the murderer I invoke this curse—
whether he is one man and all unknown,
or one of many—may he wear out his life
in misery to miserable doom!
If with my knowledge he lives at my hearth 250
I pray that I myself may feel my curse.

On you I lay my charge to fulfill all this
for me, for the God, and for this land of ours
destroyed and blighted, by the God forsaken.

Even were this no matter of God's ordinance 255
it would not fit you so to leave it lie,
unpurified, since a good man is dead
and one that was a king. Search it out.

Since I am now the holder of his office,
and have his bed and wife that once was his,
and had his line not been unfortunate
we would have common children—(fortune leaped
upon his head)—because of all these things,
I fight in his defence as for my father,
and I shall try all means to take the murderer
of Laius the son of Labdacus
the son of Polydorus and before him
of Cadmus and before him of Agenor.
Those who do not obey me, may the Gods
grant no crops springing from the ground they plough
nor children to their women! May a fate
like this, or one still worse than this consume them!
For you whom these words please, the other Thebans,
may Justice as your ally and all the Gods
live with you, blessing you now and for ever!

Chorus

As you have held me to my oath, I speak:
I neither killed the king nor can declare
the killer; but since Phoebus set the quest
it is his part to tell who the man is.

Oedipus

Right; but to put compulsion on the Gods
against their will—no man can do that.

Chorus

May I then say what I think second best?

Oedipus

If there's a third best, too, spare not to tell it.

Chorus

I know that what the Lord Teiresias
sees, is most often what the Lord Apollo
sees. If you should inquire of this from him
you might find out most clearly.

Oedipus

Even in this my actions have not been sluggard.
On Creon's word I have sent two messengers
and why the prophet is not here already
I have been wondering.

Chorus

His skill apart
there is besides only an old faint story.

290

Oedipus

What is it?
I look at every story.

Chorus

It was said
that he was killed by certain wayfarers.

Oedipus

I heard that, too, but no one saw the killer.

Chorus

Yet if he has a share of fear at all,
his courage will not stand firm, hearing your curse.

295

Oedipus

The man who in the doing did not shrink
will fear no word.

Chorus

Here comes his prosecutor:
led by your men the godly prophet comes
in whom alone of mankind truth is native.

(Enter Teiresias, led by a little boy.)

Oedipus

Teiresias, you are versed in everything,
things teachable and things not to be spoken,
things of the heaven and earth-creeping things.
You have no eyes but in your mind you know
with what a plague our city is afflicted.
My lord, in you alone we find a champion,

300

in you alone one that can rescue us.
Perhaps you have not heard the messengers,
but Phoebus sent in answer to our sending
an oracle declaring that our freedom
from this disease would only come when we
should learn the names of those who killed King Laius,
and kill them or expel from our country.
Do not begrudge us oracles from birds,
or any other way of prophecy
within your skill; save yourself and the city,
save me; redeem the debt of our pollution
that lies on us because of this dead man.
We are in your hands; pains are most nobly taken
to help another when you have means and power.

Teiresias

'Alas, how terrible is wisdom when
it brings no profit to the man that's wise!
This I knew well, but had forgotten it,
else I would not have come here.

Oedipus

What is this?

How sad you are now you have come!

Teiresias

Let me

go home. It will be easiest for us both
to bear our several destinies to the end
if you will follow my advice.

Oedipus

You'd rob us

of this your gift of prophecy? You talk
as one who had no care for law nor love
for Thebes who reared you.

Teiresias

Yes, but I see that even your own words
miss the mark; therefore I must fear for mine.

Oedipus

For God's sake if you know of anything,
do not turn from us; all of us kneel to you,
all of us here, your suppliants.

Teiresias

All of you here know nothing. I will not
bring to the light of day my troubles, mine—
rather than call them yours.

Oedipus

What do you mean?

You know of something but refuse to speak
Would you betray us and destroy the city?

330

Teiresias

I will not bring this pain upon us both,
neither on you nor on myself. Why is it
you question me and waste your labour? I
will tell you nothing.

Oedipus

You would provoke a stone! Tell us, you villain,
tell us, and do not stand there quietly
unmoved and balking at the issue.

335

Teiresias

You blame my temper but you do not see
your own that lives within you; it is me
you chide.

Oedipus

Who would not feel his temper rise
at words like these with which you shame our city?

340

Teiresias

Of themselves things will come, although I hide them
and breathe no word of them.

Oedipus

Since they will come
tell them to me.

Teiresias

I will say nothing further.

Against this answer let your temper rage
as wildly as you will.

Oedipus

Indeed I am

so angry I shall not hold back a jot
of what I think. For I would have you know
I think you were complotter of the deed
and doer of the deed save in so far
as for the actual killing. Had you had eyes
I would have said alone you murdered him.

Teiresias

Yes? Then I warn you faithfully to keep
the letter of your proclamation and
from this day forth to speak no word of greeting
to these nor me; you are the land's pollution.

Oedipus

How shamelessly you started up this taunt!
How do you think you will escape?

Teiresias

I have.

I have escaped; the truth is what I cherish
and that's my strength.

Oedipus

And who has taught you truth?

Not your profession surely!

Teiresias

You have taught me,
for you have made me speak against my will.

Oedipus

Speak what? Tell me again that I may learn it better.

Teiresias

Did you not understand before or would you
provoke me into speaking?

Oedipus

I did not grasp it,
not so to call it known. Say it again.

Teiresias

I say you are the murderer of the king
whose murderer you seek.

Oedipus

Not twice you shall
say calumnies like this and stay unpunished.

Teiresias

Shall I say more to tempt your anger more?

Oedipus

As much as you desire; it will be said
in vain.

365

Teiresias

I say that with those you love best
you live in foulest shame unconsciously
and do not see where you are in calamity.

Oedipus

Do you imagine you can always talk
like this, and live to laugh at it hereafter?

Teiresias

Yes, if the truth has anything of strength.

Oedipus

It has, but not for you; it has no strength
for you because you are blind in mind and ears
as well as in your eyes.

370

Teiresias

You are a poor wretch
to taunt me with the very insults which
every one soon will heap upon yourself.

Oedipus

Your life is one long night so that you cannot
hurt me or any other who sees the light.

375

Teiresias

It is not fate that I should be your ruin,
Apollo is enough; it is his care
to work this out.

Oedipus

Was this your own design
or Creon's?

Teiresias

Creon is no hurt to you,
but you are to yourself.

Oedipus

Wealth, sovereignty and skill outmatching skill
for the contrivance of an envied life!
Great store of jealousy fill your treasury chests,
if my friend Creon, friend from the first and loyal,
thus secretly attacks me, secretly
desires to drive me out and secretly
suborns this juggling, trick devising quack,
this wily beggar who has only eyes
for his own gains, but blindness in his skill.
For, tell me, where have you seen clear, Teiresias,
with your prophetic eyes? When the dark singer,
the sphinx, was in your country, did you speak
word of deliverance to its citizens?
And yet the riddle's answer was not the province
of a chance comer. It was a prophet's task
and plainly you had no such gift of prophecy
from birds nor otherwise from any God
to glean a word of knowledge. But I came,
Oedipus, who knew nothing, and I stopped her.
I solved the riddle by my wit alone.
Mine was no knowledge got from birds. And now
you would expel me,
because you think that you will find a place
by Creon's throne. I think you will be sorry,

both you and your accomplice, for your plot
to drive me out. And did I not regard you
as an old man, some suffering would have taught you
that what was in your heart was treason

Chorus

We look at this man's words and yours, my king,
and we find both have spoken them in anger. 405
We need no angry words but only thought
how we may best hit the God's meaning for us

Teiresias

If you are king, at least I have the right
no less to speak in my defence against you.
Of that much I am master. I am no slave 410
of yours, but Loxias', and so I shall not
enroll myself with Creon for my patron.
Since you have taunted me with being blind,
here is my word for you.
You have your eyes but see not where you are
in sin, nor where you live, nor whom you live with.
Do you know who your parents are? Unknowing 415
you are an enemy to kith and kin
in death, beneath the earth, and in this life.
A deadly footed, double striking curse,
from father and mother both, shall drive you forth
out of this land, with darkness on your eyes,
that now have such straight vision. Shall there be
a place will not be harbour to your cries, 420
a corner of Cithaeron will not ring
in echo to your cries, soon, soon,—
when you shall learn the secret of your marriage,
which steered you to a haven in this house,—
haven no haven, after lucky voyage?
And of the multitude of other evils
establishing a grim equality
between you and your children, you know nothing. 425

So, muddy with contempt my words and Creon's!
Misery shall grind no man as it will you

Oedipus

Is it endurable that I should hear
such words from him? Go and a curse go with you!
Quick, home with you! Out of my house at once!

Teiresias

I would not have come either had you not called me.

Oedipus

I did not know then you would talk like a fool—
or it would have been long before I called you.

Teiresias

I am a fool then, as it seems to you—
but to the parents who have bred you, wise.

Oedipus

What parents? Stop! Who are they of all the world?

Teiresias

This day will show your birth and will destroy you.

Oedipus

How needlessly your riddles darken everything

Teiresias

But it's in riddle answering you are strongest.

Oedipus

Yes. Taunt me where you will find me great.

Teiresias

It is this very luck that has destroyed you.

Oedipus

I do not care, if it has saved this city.

Teiresias

Well, I will go. Come, boy, lead me away.

Oedipus

Yes, lead him off So long as you are here,

you'll be a stumbling block and a vexation;
once gone, you will not trouble me again.

Teiresias

I have said
what I came here to say not fearing your
countenance. there is no way you can hurt me.
I tell you, king, this man, this murderer
(whom you have long declared you are in search of,
indicting him in threatening proclamation
as murderer of Laius)—he is here. 450
In name he is a stranger among citizens
but soon he will be shown to be a citizen
true native Theban, and he'll have no joy
of the discovery: blindness for sight
and beggary for riches his exchange, 455
he shall go journeying to a foreign country
tapping his way before him with a stick
He shall be proved father and brother both
to his own children in his house; to her
that gave him birth, a son and husband both;
a fellow sower in his father's bed
with that same father that he murdered.
Go within, reckon that out, and if you find me 460
mistaken, say I have no skill in prophecy.

(Exeunt separately Teiresias and Oedipus.)

Chorus

Strophe
Who is the man proclaimed
by Delphi's prophetic rock
as the bloody handed murderer,
the doer of deeds that none dare name? 465
Now is the time for him to run
with a stronger foot
than Pegasus
for the child of Zeus leaps in arms upon him 470
with fire and the lightning bolt,

and terribly close on his heels
are the Fates that never miss.

Antistrophe

Lately from snowy Parnassus
clearly the voice flashed forth,
bidding each Theban track him down,
the unknown murderer.
In the savage forests he lurks and in
the caverns like
the mountain bull.
He is sad and lonely, and lonely his feet
that carry him far from the navel of earth;
but its prophecies, ever living,
flutter around his head.

Strophe

The augur has spread confusion,
terrible confusion;
I do not approve what was said
nor can I deny it.
I do not know what to say;
I am in a flutter of foreboding;
I never heard in the present
nor past of a quarrel between
the sons of Labdacus and Polybus,
that I might bring as proof
in attacking the popular fame
of Oedipus, seeking
to take vengeance for undiscovered
death in the line of Labdacus.

Antistrophe

Truly Zeus and Apollo are wise
and in human things all knowing;
but amongst men there is no
distinct judgment, between the prophet
and me—which of us is right.

One man may pass another in wisdom
 but I would never agree
 with those that find fault with the king
 till I should see the word
 proved right beyond doubt. For once
 in visible form the Sphinx
 came on him and all of us
 saw his wisdom and in that test
 he saved the city. So he will not be condemned by my mind. 512

(Enter Creon.)

Creon

Citizens, I have come because I heard
 deadly words spread about me, that the king
 accuses me I cannot take that from him
 If he believes that in these present troubles 515
 he has been wronged by me in word or deed
 I do not want to live on with the burden
 of such a scandal on me. The report 520
 injures me doubly and most vitally—
 for I'll be called a traitor to my city
 and traitor also to my friends and you.

Chorus

Perhaps it was a sudden gust of anger
 that forced that insult from him, and no judgment.

Creon

But did he say that it was in compliance 525
 with schemes of mine that the seer told him lies?

Chorus

Yes, he said that, but why, I do not know.

Creon

Were his eyes straight in his head? Was his mind right
 when he accused me in this fashion?

Chorus

I do not know; I have no eyes to see 530
 what princes do. Here comes the king himself.

(Enter Oedipus)

Oedipus

You, sir, how is it you come here? Have you so much brazen-faced daring that you venture in my house although you are proved manifestly the murderer of that man, and though you tried, openly, highway robbery of my crown? For God's sake, tell me what you saw in me, what cowardice or what stupidity, that made you lay a plot like this against me? Did you imagine I should not observe the crafty scheme that stole upon me or seeing it, take no means to counter it? Was it not stupid of you to make the attempt, to try to hunt down royal power without the people at your back or friends? For only with the people at your back or money can the hunt end in the capture of a crown

Creon

Do you know what you're doing? Will you listen to words to answer yours, and then pass judgment?

Oedipus

You're quick to speak, but I am slow to grasp you, for I have found you dangerous,—and my foe.

Creon

First of all hear what I shall say to that.

Oedipus

At least don't tell me that you are not guilty.

Creon

If you think obstinacy without wisdom a valuable possession, you are wrong.

Oedipus

And you are wrong if you believe that one, a criminal, will not be punished only because he is my kinsman.

Creon

This is but just—
but tell me, then, of what offense I'm guilty?

Oedipus

Did you or did you not urge me to send
to this prophetic mumbler? 555

Creon

I did indeed,
and I shall stand by what I told you.

Oedipus

How long ago is it since Laius. . . .

Creon

What about Laius? I don't understand.

Oedipus

Vanished—died—was murdered? 560

Creon

It is long,
a long, long time to reckon.

Oedipus

Was this prophet
in the profession then?

Creon

He was, and honoured
as highly as he is today.

Oedipus

At that time did he say a word about me?

Creon

Never, at least when I was near him. 565

Oedipus

You never made a search for the dead man?

Creon

We searched, indeed, but never learned of anything.

Oedipus

Why did our wise old friend not say this then?

Creon

I don't know; and when I know nothing, I
usually hold my tongue.

Oedipus

You know this much,
and can declare this much if you are loyal.

Creon

What is it? If I know, I'll not deny it.

Oedipus

That he would not have said that I killed Laius
had he not met you first.

Creon

You know yourself
whether he said this, but I demand that I
should hear as much from you as you from me.

Oedipus

Then hear,—I'll not be proved a murderer.

Creon

Well, then. You're married to my sister.

Oedipus

Yes,
that I am not disposed to deny.

Creon

You rule
this country giving her an equal share
in the government?

Oedipus

Yes, everything she wants
she has from me.

Creon

And I, as thirdsman to you,
am rated as the equal of you two?

Oedipus

Yes, and it's there you've proved yourself false friend.

Creon

Not if you will reflect on it as I do.
 Consider, first, if you think any one
 would choose to rule and fear rather than rule 585
 and sleep untroubled by a fear if power
 were equal in both cases I, at least,
 I was not born with such a frantic yearning
 to be a king—but to do what kings do.
 And so it is with every one who has learned
 wisdom and self-control. As it stands now,
 the prizes are all mine—and without fear. 590
 But if I were the king myself, I must
 do much that went against the grain.
 How should despotic rule seem sweeter to me
 than painless power and an assured authority?
 I am not so besotted yet that I
 want other honours than those that come with profit. 595
 Now every man's my pleasure; every man greets me;
 now those who are your suitors fawn on me,—
 success for them depends upon my favour
 Why should I let all this go to win that?
 My mind would not be traitor if it's wise; 600
 I am no treason lover, of my nature,
 nor would I ever dare to join a plot.
 Prove what I say. Go to the oracle
 at Pytho and inquire about the answers,
 if they are as I told you. For the rest, 605
 if you discover I laid any plot
 together with the seer, kill me, I say,
 not only by your vote but by my own.
 But do not charge me on obscure opinion
 without some proof to back it. It's not just
 lightly to count your knaves as honest men, 610
 nor honest men as knaves. To throw away
 an honest friend is, as it were, to throw
 your life away, which a man loves the best.

In time you will know all with certainty,
time is the only test of honest men,
one day is space enough to know a rogue.

Chorus

His words are wise, king, if one fears to fall.
Those who are quick of temper are not safe.

Oedipus

When he that plots against me secretly
moves quickly, I must quickly counterplot.
If I wait taking no decisive measure
his business will be done, and mine be spoiled.

Creon

What do you want to do then? Banish me?

Oedipus

No, certainly; kill you, not banish you.¹

Creon

I do not think that you've your wits about you.

Oedipus

For my own interests, yes.

Creon

But for mine, too,
you should think equally.

Oedipus

You are a rogue.

Creon

Suppose you do not understand?

Oedipus

But yet

I must be ruler.

1. Two lines omitted here owing to the confusion in the dialogue consequent on the loss of a third line. The lines as they stand in Jebb's edition (1902) are:

Oed. That you may show what manner of thing is envy.

Creon. You speak as one that will not yield or trust

[*Oed.* lost line]

Creon

Not if you rule badly.

Oedipus

O, city, city!

Creon

I too have some share
in the city; it is not yours alone.

630

Chorus

Stop, my lords! Here—and in the nick of time
I see Jocasta coming from the house;
with her help lay the quarrel that now stirs you.

(*Enter Jocasta.*)

Jocasta

For shame! Why have you raised this foolish squabbling
brawl? Are you not ashamed to air your private
griefs when the country's sick? Go in, you, Oedipus,
and you, too, Creon, into the house. Don't magnify
your nothing troubles.

635

Creon

Sister, Oedipus,
your husband, thinks he has the right to do
terrible wrongs—he has but to choose between
two terrors: banishing or killing me.

640

Oedipus

He's right, Jocasta; for I find him plotting
with knavish tricks against my person.

Creon

That God may never bless me! May I die
accursed, if I have been guilty of
one tittle of the charge you bring against me!

645

Jocasta

I beg you, Oedipus, trust him in this,
spare him for the sake of this his oath to God,
for my sake, and the sake of those who stand here.

Chorus

Be gracious, be merciful,
we beg of you.

Oedipus

In what would you have me yield?

Chorus

He has been no silly child in the past.
He is strong in his oath now.
Spare him.

Oedipus

Do you know what you ask?

Chorus

Yes.

Oedipus

Tell me then.

Chorus

He has been your friend before all men's eyes; do not cast him
away dishonoured on an obscure conjecture.

Oedipus

I would have you know that this request of yours
really requests my death or banishment.

Chorus

May the Sun God, king of Gods, forbid! May I die without God's
blessing, without friends' help, if I had any such thought. But my
spirit is broken by my unhappiness for my wasting country; and
this would but add troubles amongst ourselves to the other
troubles.

Oedipus

Well, let him go then—if I must die ten times for it,
or be sent out dishonoured into exile.
It is your lips that prayed for him I pitied,
not his; wherever he is, I shall hate him.

Creon

I see you sulk in yielding and you're dangerous
when you are out of temper; natures like yours
are justly heaviest for themselves to bear.

675

Oedipus

Leave me alone! Take yourself off, I tell you.

Creon

I'll go, you have not known me, but they have,
and they have known my innocence.

(*Exit.*)

Chorus

Won't you take him inside, lady?

Jocasta

Yes, when I've found out what was the matter.

680

Chorus

There was some misconceived suspicion of a story, and on the
other side the sting of injustice.

Jocasta

So, on both sides?

Chorus

Yes.

Jocasta

What was the story?

Chorus

I think it best, in the interests of the country, to leave it where
it ended.

685

Oedipus

You see where you have ended, straight of judgment
although you are, by softening my anger.

Chorus

Sir, I have said before and I say again—be sure that I would have
been proved a madman, bankrupt in sane council, if I should put
you away, you who steered the country I love safely when she

689

was crazed with troubles. God grant that now, too, you may prove a fortunate guide for us.

Jocasta

Tell me, my lord, I beg of you, what was it that roused your anger so?

Oedipus

Yes, I will tell you.
I honour you more than I honour them
It was Creon and the plots he laid against me.

Jocasta

Tell me—if you can clearly tell the quarrel—

Oedipus

Creon says
that I'm the murderer of Laius

Jocasta

Of his own knowledge or on information?

Oedipus

He sent this rascal prophet to me, since
he keeps his own mouth clean of any guilt.

Jocasta

Do not concern yourself about this matter,
listen to me and learn that human beings
have no part in the craft of prophecy.
Of that I'll show you a short proof.
There was an oracle once that came to Laius,—
I will not say that it was Phoebus' own,
but it was from his servants—and it told him
that it was fate that he should die a victim
at the hands of his own son, a son to be born
of Laius and me. But, see now, he,
the king, was killed by foreign highway robbers
at a place where three roads meet—so goes the story;
and for the son—before three days were out
after his birth King Laius pierced his ankles

and by the hands of others cast him forth
 upon a pathless hillside. So Apollo 720
 failed to fulfill his oracle to the son,
 that he should kill his father, and to Laius
 also proved false in that the thing he feared,
 death at his son's hands, never came to pass.
 So clear in this case were the oracles,
 so clear and false. Give them no heed, I say,
 what God discovers need of, easily
 he shows to us himself. 725

Oedipus

O dear Jocasta,
 as I hear this from you, there comes upon me
 a wandering of the soul—I could run mad.

Jocasta

What trouble is it, that you turn again
 and speak like this?

Oedipus

I thought I heard you say
 that Laius was killed at a crossroads 730

Jocasta

Yes, that was how the story went and still
 that word goes round.

Oedipus

Where is this place, Jocasta,
 where he was murdered?

Jocasta

Phocis is the country
 and the road splits there, one of two roads from Delphi,
 another comes from Daulia.

Oedipus

How long ago is this? 735

Jocasta

The news came to the city just before

you became king and all men's eyes looked to you.
What is it, Oedipus, that's in your mind?

Oedipus

What have you designed, O Zeus, to do with me?

Jocasta

What is the thought that troubles your heart?

Oedipus

Don't ask me yet—tell me of Laius—
How did he look? How old or young was he?

Jocasta

He was a tall man and his hair was grizzled
already—nearly white—and in his form
not unlike you.

Oedipus

O God, I think I have
called curses on myself in ignorance.

Jocasta

What do you mean? I am terrified
when I look at you.

Oedipus

I have a deadly fear
that the old seer had eyes. You'll show me more
if you can tell me one more thing.

Jocasta

I will.
I'm frightened,—but if I can understand,
I'll tell you all you ask.

Oedipus

How was his company?
Had he few with him when he went this journey,
or many servants, as would suit a prince?

Jocasta

In all there were but five, and among them
a herald; and one carriage for the king.

Oedipus

It's plain—its plain—who was it told you this?

755

Jocasta

The only servant that escaped safe home.

Oedipus

Is he at home now?

Jocasta

No, when he came home again

and saw you king and Laius was dead,
he came to me and touched my hand and begged
that I should send him to the fields to be
my shepherd and so he might see the city
as far off as he might. So I
sent him away. He was an honest man,
as slaves go, and was worthy of far more
than what he asked of me.

760

Oedipus

O, how I wish that he could come back quickly!

765

Jocasta

He can. Why is your heart so set on this?

Oedipus

O dear Jocasta, I am full of fears
that I have spoken far too much; and therefore
I wish to see this shepherd.

Jocasta

He will come;

but, Oedipus, I think I'm worthy too
to know what it is that disquiets you.

770

Oedipus

It shall not be kept from you, since my mind
has gone so far with its forebodings. Whom
should I confide in rather than you, who is there
of more importance to me who have passed
through such a fortune?

Polybus was my father, king of Corinth,
and Merope, the Dorian, my mother.
I was held greatest of the citizens
in Corinth till a curious chance befell me
as I shall tell you—curious, indeed,
but hardly worth the store I set upon it.
There was a dinner and at it a man,
a drunken man, accused me in his drink
of being bastard. I was furious
but held my temper under for that day.
Next day I went and taxed my parents with it;
they took the insult very ill from him,
the drunken fellow who had uttered it.
So I was comforted for their part, but
still this thing rankled always, for the story
crept about widely. And I went at last
to Pytho, though my parents did not know.
But Phoebus sent me home again unhonoured
in what I came to learn, but he foretold
other and desperate horrors to befall me,
that I was fated to lie with my mother,
and show to daylight an accursed breed
which men would not endure, and I was doomed
to be murderer of the father that begot me.
When I heard this I fled, and in the days
that followed I would measure from the stars
the whereabouts of Corinth—yes, I fled
to somewhere where I should not see fulfilled
the infamies told in that dreadful oracle.
And as I journeyed I came to the place
where, as you say, this king met with his death.
Jocasta, I will tell you the whole truth.
When I was near the branching of the crossroads,
going on foot, I was encountered by
a herald and a carriage with a man in it,
just as you tell me. He that led the way

and the old man himself wanted to thrust me
 out of the road by force. I became angry 805
 and struck the coachman who was pushing me.
 When the old man saw this he watched his moment,
 and as I passed he struck me from his carriage,
 full on the head with his two pointed goad.
 But he was paid in full and presently 810
 my stick had struck him backwards from the car
 and he rolled out of it. And then I killed them
 all. If it happened there was any tie
 of kinship twixt this man and Laius,
 who is then now more miserable than I, 815
 what man on earth so hated by the Gods,
 since neither citizen nor foreigner
 may welcome me at home or even greet me,
 but drive me out of doors? And it is I,
 I and no other have so cursed myself. 820
 And I pollute the bed of him I killed
 by the hands that killed him. Was I not born evil?
 Am I not utterly unclean? I had to fly
 and in my banishment not even see
 my kindred nor set foot in my own country,
 or otherwise my fate was to be yoked 825
 in marriage with my mother and kill my father,
 Polybus who begot me and had reared me.
 Would not one rightly judge and say that on me
 these things were sent by some malignant God?
 O no, no, no—O holy majesty 830
 of God on high, may I not see that day!
 May I be gone out of men's sight before
 I see the deadly taint of this disaster
 come upon me.

Chorus

Sir, we too fear these things. But until you see this man face to
 face and hear his story, hope. 835

Oedipus

Yes, I have just this much of hope—to wait until the herdsman comes.

Jocasta

And when he comes, what do you want with him?

Oedipus

I'll tell you; if I find that his story is the same as yours, I at least will be clear of this guilt.

Jocasta

Why what so particularly did you learn from my story?

Oedipus

You said that he spoke of highway *robbers* who killed Laius. Now if he uses the same number, it was not I who killed him. One man cannot be the same as many. But if he speaks of a man travelling alone, then clearly the burden of the guilt inclines towards me.

Jocasta

Be sure, at least, that this was how he told the story. He cannot unsay it now, for every one in the city heard it—not I alone. But, Oedipus, even if he diverges from what he said then, he shall never prove that the murder of Laius squares rightly with the prophecy—for Loxias declared that the king should be killed by his own son. And that poor creature did not kill him surely,—for he died himself first. So as far as prophecy goes, henceforward I shall not look to the right hand or the left.

Oedipus

Right. But yet, send some one for the peasant to bring him here; do not neglect it.

Jocasta

I will send quickly. Now let me go indoors. I will do nothing except what pleases you.

(*Exeunt.*)

Chorus

Strophe

May destiny ever find me

pious in word and deed 865
 prescribed by the laws that live on high:
 laws begotten in the clear air of heaven,
 whose only father is Olympus;
 no mortal nature brought them to birth,
 no forgetfulness shall hull them to sleep; 870
 for God is great in them and grows not old.

Antistrophe

Insolence breeds the tyrant, insolence
 if it is glutted with a surfeit, unseasonable, unprofitable, 875
 climbs to the roof-top and plunges
 sheer down to the ruin that must be,
 and there its feet are no service.
 But I pray that the God may never 880
 abolish the eager ambition that profits the state.
 For I shall never cease to hold the God as our protector.

Strophe

If a man walks with haughtiness
 of hand or word and gives no heed 885
 to Justice and the shrines of Gods
 despises—may an evil doom
 smite him for his ill-starred pride of heart!—
 if he reaps gains without justice
 and will not hold from impiety 890
 and his fingers itch for untouchable things.
 When such things are done, what man shall contrive
 to shield his soul from the shafts of the God?
 When such deeds are held in honour, 895
 why should I honour the Gods in the dance?

Antistrophe

No longer to the holy place,
 to the navel of earth I'll go
 to worship, nor to Abae
 nor to Olympia, 900
 unless the oracles are proved to fit,
 for all men's hands to point at.

O Zeus, if you are rightly called
the sovereign lord, all-mastering,
let this not escape you nor your ever-living power!
The oracles concerning Laius
are old and dim and men regard them not.
Apollo is nowhere clear in honour; God's service perishes.

(*Enter Jocasta, carrying garlands.*)

Jocasta

Princes of the land, I have had the thought to go
to the Gods' temples, bringing in my hand
garlands and gifts of incense, as you see.
For Oedipus excites himself too much
at every sort of trouble, not conjecturing,
like a man of sense, what will be from what was,
but he is always at the speaker's mercy,
when he speaks terrors. I can do no good
by my advice, and so I came as suppliant
to you, Lycaean Apollo, who are nearest.
These are the symbols of my prayer and this
my prayer: grant us escape free of the curse.
Now when we look to him we are all afraid;
he's pilot of our ship and he is frightened.

(*Enter Messenger.*)

Messenger

Might I learn from you, sirs, where is the house of Oedipus? Or
best of all, if you know, where is the king himself?

Chorus

This is his house and he is within doors. This lady is his wife and
mother of his children.

Messenger

God bless you, lady, and God bless your household! God bless
Oedipus' noble wife!

Jocasta

God bless you, sir, for your kind greeting! What do you want
of us that you have come here? What have you to tell us?

Messenger

Good news, lady. Good for your house and for your husband.

Jocasta

What is your news? Who sent you to us?

935

Messenger

I come from Corinth and the news I bring will give you pleasure.
Perhaps a little pain too.

Jocasta

What is this news of double meaning?

Messenger

The people of the Isthmus will choose Oedipus to be their king.
That is the rumour there.

940

Jocasta

But isn't their king still old Polybus?

Messenger

No. He is in his grave. Death has got him.

Jocasta

Is that the truth? Is Oedipus' father dead?

Messenger

May I die myself if it be otherwise!

Jocasta (to a servant)

Be quick and run to the King with the news! O oracles of the
Gods, where are you now? It was from this man Oedipus fled, lest
he should be his murderer! And now he is dead, in the course of
nature, and not killed by Oedipus.

945

(*Enter Oedipus.*)

Oedipus

Dearest Jocasta, why have you sent for me?

950

Jocasta

Listen to this man and when you hear reflect what is the outcome
of the holy oracles of the Gods.

Oedipus

Who is he? What is his message for me?

Jocasta

He is from Corinth and he tells us that your father Polybus is dead and gone.

Oedipus

What's this you say, sir? Tell me yourself.

Messenger

Since this is the first matter you want clearly told: Polybus has gone down to death. You may be sure of it.

Oedipus

By treachery or sickness?

Messenger

A small thing will put old bodies asleep.

Oedipus

So he died of sickness, it seems,—poor old man!

Messenger

Yes, and of age—the long years he had measured.

Oedipus

Ha! Ha! O dear Jocasta, why should one look to the Pythian hearth? Why should one look to the birds screaming overhead? They prophesied that I should kill my father! But he's dead, and hidden deep in earth, and I stand here who never laid a hand on spear against him,—unless perhaps he died of longing for me, and thus I am his murderer. But they, the oracles, as they stand—he's taken them away with him, they're dead as he himself is, and worthless.

Jocasta

That I told you before now.

Oedipus

You did, but I was misled by my fear.

Jocasta

Then lay no more of them to heart, not one

Oedipus

But surely I must fear my mother's bed?

Jocasta

Why should man fear since chance is all in all
for him, and he can clearly foreknow nothing?
Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly.
As to your mother's marriage bed,—don't fear it.
Before this, in dreams too, as well as oracles,
many a man has lain with his own mother.
But he to whom such things are nothing bears
his life most easily.

980

Oedipus

All that you say would be said perfectly
if she were dead; but since she lives I must
still fear, although you talk so well, Jocasta.

985

Jocasta

Still in your father's death there's light of comfort?

Oedipus

Great light of comfort; but I fear the living.

Messenger

Who is the woman that makes you afraid?

Oedipus

Merope, old man, Polybus' wife.

990

Messenger

What about her frightens the queen and you?

Oedipus

A terrible oracle, stranger, from the Gods.

Messenger

Can it be told? Or does the sacred law
forbid another to have knowledge of it?

Oedipus

O no! Once on a time Loxias said
that I should lie with my own mother and

995

take on my hands the blood of my own father.
And so for these long years I've lived away
from Corinth, it has been to my great happiness;
but yet it's sweet to see the face of parents.

Messenger

This was the fear which drove you out of Corinth?

II

Oedipus

Old man, I did not wish to kill my father.

Messenger

Why should I not free you from this fear, sir,
since I have come to you in all goodwill?

Oedipus

You would not find me thankless if you did.

Messenger

Why, it was just for this I brought the news,—
to earn your thanks when you had come safe home.

I

Oedipus

No, I will never come near my parents.

Messenger

Son,

it's very plain you don't know what you're doing.

Oedipus

What do you mean, old man? For God's sake, tell me.

Messenger

If your homecoming is checked by fears like these.

Oedipus

Yes, I'm afraid that Phoebus may prove right.

Messenger

The murder and the incest?

Oedipus

Yes, old man;

that is my constant terror.

Messenger

Do you know
that all your fears are empty?

Oedipus

How is that,
if they are father and mother and I their son?

1015

Messenger

Because Polybus was no kin to you in blood.

Oedipus

What, was not Polybus my father?

Messenger

No more than I but just so much.

Oedipus

How can
my father be my father as much as one
that's nothing to me?

Messenger

Neither he nor I
begat you.

1020

Oedipus

Why then did he call me son?

Messenger

A gift he took you from these hands of mine.

Oedipus

Did he love so much what he took from another's hand?

Messenger

His childlessness before persuaded him.

Oedipus

Was I a child you bought or found when I
was given to him?

1025

Messenger

On Cithaeron's slopes
in the twisting thickets you were found.

Oedipus

And why
were you a traveller in those parts?

Messenger

I was
in charge of mountain flocks.

Oedipus

You were a shepherd?
A hireling vagrant?

Messenger

Yes, but at least at that time
the man that saved your life, son.

10

Oedipus

What ailed me when you took me in your arms?

Messenger

In that your ankles should be witnesses.

Oedipus

Why do you speak of that old pain?

Messenger

I loosed you;
the tendons of your feet were pierced and fettered,—

Oedipus

My swaddling clothes brought me a rare disgrace.

1

Messenger

So that from this you're called your present name.

Oedipus

Was this my father's doing or my mother's?
For God's sake, tell me.

Messenger

I don't know, but he
who gave you to me has more knowledge than I.

Oedipus

You yourself did not find me then? You took me
from someone else?

Messenger

Yes, from another shepherd.

1040

Oedipus

Who was he? Do you know him well enough
to tell?

Messenger

He was called Laius' man.

Oedipus

You mean the king who reigned here in the old days?

Messenger

Yes, he was that man's shepherd.

Oedipus

Is he alive

1045

still, so that I could see him?

Messenger

You who live here

would know that best.

Oedipus

Do any of you here

know of this shepherd whom he speaks about
in town or in the fields? Tell me. It's time
that this was found out once for all.

1050

Chorus

I think he is none other than the peasant
whom you have sought to see already, but
Jocasta here can tell us best of that.

Oedipus

Jocasta, do you know about this man
whom we have sent for? Is he the man he mentions?

1055

Jocasta

Why ask of whom he spoke? Don't give it heed;
nor try to keep in mind what has been said.
It will be wasted labour.

Oedipus

With such clues
I could not fail to bring my birth to light.

Jocasta

I beg you—do not hunt this out—I beg you,
if you have any care for your own life.
What I am suffering is enough.

Oedipus

Keep up
your heart, Jocasta. Though I'm proved a slave,
thrice slave, and though my mother is thrice slave,
you'll not be shown to be of lowly lineage.

Jocasta

O be persuaded by me, I entreat you;
do not do this.

Oedipus

I will not be persuaded to let be
the chance of finding out the whole thing clearly

Jocasta

It is because I wish you well that I
give you this counsel—and it's the best counsel.

Oedipus

Then the best counsel vexes me, and has
for some while since.

Jocasta

O Oedipus, God help you!
God keep you from the knowledge of who you are!

Oedipus

Here, some one, go and fetch the shepherd for me;
and let her find her joy in her rich family!

Jocasta

O Oedipus, unhappy Oedipus!
that is all I can call you, and the last thing
that I shall ever call you.

(Exit.)

Chorus

Why has the queen gone, Oedipus, in wild
grief rushing from us? I am afraid that trouble
will break out of this silence. 1075

Oedipus

Break out what will! I at least shall be
willing to see my ancestry, though humble.
Perhaps she is ashamed of my low birth,
for she has all a woman's high-flown pride.
But I account myself a child of Fortune, 1080
beneficent Fortune, and I shall not be
dishonoured. She's the mother from whom I spring;
the months, my brothers, marked me, now as small,
and now again as mighty. Such is my breeding,
and I shall never prove so false to it, 1085
as not to find the secret of my birth.

Chorus

Strophe

If I am a prophet and wise of heart
you shall not fail, Cithaeron, 1090
by the limitless sky, you shall not!—
to know at tomorrow's full moon
that Oedipus honours you,
as native to him and mother and nurse at once;
and that you are honoured in dancing by us, as finding favour in
sight of our king.
Apollo, to whom we cry, find these things pleasing!

Antistrophe

Who was it bore you, child? One of 1098
the long-lived nymphs who lay with Pan—
the father who treads the hills?
Or was she a bride of Loxias, your mother? The grassy slopes
are all of them dear to him. Or perhaps Cyllene's king 1104
or the Bacchants' God that lives on the tops

of the hills received you a gift from some
one of the Helicon Nymphs, with whom he mostly plays?

(Enter an old man, led by Oedipus' servants.)

Oedipus

If some one like myself who never met him
may make a guess,—I think this is the herdsman,
whom we were seeking. His old age is consonant
with the other. And besides, the men who bring him
I recognize as my own servants. You
perhaps may better me in knowledge since
you've seen the man before.

1110

111

Chorus

You can be sure
I recognize him. For if Laius
had ever an honest shepherd, this was he.

Oedipus

You, sir, from Corinth, I must ask you first,
is this the man you spoke of?

112

Messenger

This is he
before your eyes.

Oedipus

Old man, look here at me
and tell me what I ask you. Were you ever
a servant of King Laius?

Herdsman

I was,—
no slave he bought but reared in his own house.

Oedipus

What did you do as work? How did you live?

Herdsman

Most of my life was spent among the flocks.

1

Oedipus

In what part of the country did you live?

Herdsmen

Cithaeron and the places near to it.

Oedipus

And somewhere there perhaps you knew this man?

Herdsmen

What was his occupation? Who?

Oedipus

This man here,
have you had any dealings with him?

1130

Herdsmen

No—
not such that I can quickly call to mind.

Messenger

That is no wonder, master But I'll make him remember what he does not know. For I know, that he well knows the country of Cithaeron, how he with two flocks, I with one kept company for three years—each year half a year—from spring till autumn time and then when winter came I drove my flocks to our fold home again and he to Laius' steadings. Well—am I right or not in what I said we did?

1135

1140

Herdsmen

You're right—although it's a long time ago.

Messenger

Do you remember giving me a child
to bring up as my foster child?

Herdsmen

What's this?
Why do you ask this question?

Messenger

Look old man,
here he is—here's the man who was that child!

1145

Herdsmen

Death take you! Won't you hold your tongue?

Oedipus

No, no,
do not find fault with him, old man. Your words
are more at fault than his.

Herdsmen

O best of masters,
how do I give offense?

Oedipus

When you refuse
to speak about the child of whom he asks you.

Herdsmen

He speaks out of his ignorance, without meaning

Oedipus

If you'll not talk to gratify me, you
will talk with pain to urge you.

Herdsmen

O please, sir,
don't hurt an old man, sir.

Oedipus (to the servants)

Here, one of you,
twist his hands behind him.

Herdsmen

Why, God help me, why?
What do you want to know?

Oedipus

You gave a child
to him,—the child he asked you of?

Herdsmen

I did.
I wish I'd died the day I did.

Oedipus

You will
unless you tell me truly.

Herdsmen

And I'll die
far worse if I should tell you.

Oedipus

This fellow
is bent on more delays, as it would seem. 1160

Herdsmen

O no, no! I have told you that I gave it.

Oedipus

Where did you get this child from? Was it your own or did you
get it from another?

Herdsmen

Not
my own at all; I had it from some one.

Oedipus

One of these citizens? or from what house?

Herdsmen

O master, please—I beg you, master, please
don't ask me more. 1165

Oedipus

You're a dead man if I
ask you again.

Herdsmen

It was one of the children
of Laius.

Oedipus

A slave? Or born in wedlock?

Herdsmen

O God, I am on the brink of frightful speech.

Oedipus

And I of frightful hearing. But I must hear. 1170

Herdsmen

The child was called his child; but she within,
your wife would tell you best how all this was.

Oedipus

She gave it to you?

Herdsmen

Yes, she did, my lord.

Oedipus

To do what with it?

Herdsmen

Make away with it.

Oedipus

She was so hard—its mother?

Herdsmen

Aye, through fear

of evil oracles.

Oedipus

Which?

Herdsmen

They said that he

should kill his parents.

Oedipus

How was it that you

gave it away to this old man?

Herdsmen

O master,

I pitied it, and thought that I could send it

off to another country and this man

was from another country But he saved it

for the most terrible troubles. If you are

the man he says you are, you're bred to misery.

Oedipus

O, O, O, they will all come,

all come out clearly! Light of the sun, let me

look upon you no more after today!

I who first saw the light bred of a match

accursed, and accursed in my living

with them I lived with, cursed in my killing.

(Exeunt all but the Chorus.)

Chorus

Strophe

O generations of men, how I
count you as equal with those who live
not at all!

What man, what man on earth wins more
of happiness than a seeming
and after that turning away?

1190

Oedipus, you are my pattern of this,
Oedipus, you and your fate!
Luckless Oedipus, whom of all men
I envy not at all.

1196

Antistrophe

In as much as he shot his bolt
beyond the others and won the prize
of happiness complete—
O Zeus—and killed and reduced to nought
the hooked taloned maid of the riddling speech,
standing a tower against death for my land:
hence he was called my king and hence
was honoured the highest of all
honours; and hence he ruled
in the great city of Thebes.

Strophe

But now whose tale is more miserable?
Who is there lives with a savager fate?
Whose troubles so reverse his life as his?

1204

O Oedipus, the famous prince
for whom a great haven
the same both as father and son
sufficed for generation,
how, O how, have the furrows ploughed
by your father endured to bear you, poor wretch,
and hold their peace so long?

Antistrophe

Time who sees all has found you out
against your will, judges your marriage accursed,
begetter and begot at one in it

O child of Laius,
would I had never seen you.
I weep for you and cry
a dirge of lamentation.

To speak directly, I drew my breath
from you at the first and so now I lull
my mouth to sleep with your name

(Enter a second messenger.)

Second Messenger

O Princes always honoured by our country,
what deeds you'll hear of and what horrors see,
what grief you'll feel, if you as true born Thebans
care for the house of Labdacus's sons
Phasis nor Ister cannot purge this house,
I think, with all their streams, such things
it hides, such evils shortly will bring forth
into the light, whether they will or not;
and troubles hurt the most
when they prove self-inflicted.

Chorus

What we had known before did not fall short
of bitter groaning's worth; what's more to tell?

Second Messenger

Shortest to hear and tell—our glorious queen
Jocasta's dead.

Chorus

Unhappy woman! How?

Second Messenger

By her own hand. The worst of what was done
you cannot know. You did not see the sight.
Yet in so far as I remember it

you'll hear the end of our unlucky queen. 1240
 When she came raging into the house she went
 straight to her marriage bed, tearing her hair
 with both her hands, and crying upon Laius 1245
 long dead—Do you remember, Laius,
 that night long past which bred a child for us
 to send you to your death and leave
 a mother making children with her son?
 And then she groaned and cursed the bed in which
 she brought forth husband by her husband, children 1250
 by her own child, an infamous double bond.
 How after that she died I do not know,—
 for Oedipus distracted us from seeing.
 He burst upon us shouting and we looked
 to him as he paced frantically around,
 begging us always. Give me a sword, I say, 1255
 to find this wife no wife, this mother's womb,
 this field of double sowing whence I sprang
 and where I sowed my children! As he raved
 some god showed him the way—none of us there.
 Bellowing terribly and led by some 1260
 invisible guide he rushed on the two doors,—
 wrenching the hollow bolts out of their sockets,
 he charged inside. There, there, we saw his wife
 hanging, the twisted rope around her neck.
 When he saw her, he cried out fearfully 1265
 and cut the dangling noose. Then, as she lay,
 poor woman, on the ground, what happened after,
 was terrible to see. He tore the brooches—
 the gold chased brooches fastening her robe—
 away from her and lifting them up high
 dashed them on his own eyeballs, shrieking out 1270
 such things as: they will never see the crime
 I have committed or had done upon me!
 Dark eyes, now in the days to come look on
 forbidden faces, do not recognize

those whom you long for—with such imprecations
he struck his eyes again and yet again
with the brooches And the bleeding eyeballs gushed
and stained his beard—no sluggish oozing drops
but a black rain and bloody hail poured down.

12

So it has broken—and not on one head
but troubles mixed for husband and for wife.
The fortune of the days gone by was true
good fortune—but today groans and destruction
and death and shame—of all ills can be named
not one is missing.

1

1

Chorus

Is he now in any ease from pain?

Second Messenger

He shouts

for some one to unbar the doors and show him
to all the men of Thebes, his father's killer,
his mother's—no I cannot say the word,
it is unholy—for he'll cast himself,
out of the land, he says, and not remain
to bring a curse upon his house, the curse
he called upon it in his proclamation But
he wants for strength, aye, and some one to guide him,
his sickness is too great to bear. You, too,
will be shown that. The bolts are opening.
Soon you will see a sight to waken pity
even in the horror of it.

(Enter the blinded Oedipus.)

Chorus

This is a terrible sight for men to see!
I never found a worse!
Poor wretch, what madness came upon you!
What evil spirit leaped upon your life
to your ill-luck—a leap beyond man's strength!
Indeed I pity you, but I cannot

look at you, though there's much I want to ask
and much to learn and much to see. 1305
I shudder at the sight of you.

Oedipus

O, O,
where am I going? Where is my voice 1310
borne on the wind to and fro?
Spirit, how far have you sprung?

Chorus

To a terrible place whereof men's ears
may not hear, nor their eyes behold it.

Oedipus

Darkness!
Horror of darkness enfolding, resistless, unspeakable visitant sped
by an ill wind in haste! 1315
madness and stabbing pain and memory
of evil deeds I have done!

Chorus

In such misfortunes it's no wonder
if double weighs the burden of your grief. 1320

Oedipus

My friend,
you are the only one steadfast, the only one that attends on me;
you still stay nursing the blind man.
Your care is not unnoticed. I can know 1325
your voice, although this darkness is my world.

Chorus

Doer of dreadful deeds, how did you dare
so far to do despite to your own eyes?
what spirit urged you to it?

Oedipus

It was Apollo, friends, Apollo,
that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows to completion. 1330
But the hand that struck me

was none but my own.
Why should I see
whose vision showed me nothing sweet to see?

I

Chorus

These things are as you say.

Oedipus

What can I see to love?
What greeting can touch my ears with joy?
Take me away, and haste—to a place out of the way!
Take me away, my friends, the greatly miserable,
the most accursed, whom God too hates
above all men on earth!

I

I

Chorus

Unhappy in your mind and your misfortune,
would I had never known you!

Oedipus

Curse on the man who took
the cruel bonds from off my legs, as I lay in the field.
He stole me from death and saved me,
no kindly service.
Had I died then
I would not be so burdensome to friends.

Chorus

I, too, could have wished it had been so.

Oedipus

Then I would not have come
to kill my father and marry my mother infamously.
Now I am godless and child of impurity,
begetter in the same seed that created my wretched self.
If there is any ill worse than ill,
that is the lot of Oedipus.

Chorus

I cannot say your remedy was good;
you would be better dead than blind and living.

Oedipus

What I have done here was best done—don't tell me
otherwise, do not give me further counsel. 1370

I do not know with what eyes I could look
upon my father when I die and go
under the earth, nor yet my wretched mother—
those two to whom I have done things deserving
worse punishment than hanging. Would the sight
of children, bred as mine are, gladden me? 1375

No, not these eyes, never. And my city,
its towers and sacred places of the Gods,
of these I robbed my miserable self
when I commanded all to drive *him* out,
the criminal since proved by God impure
and of the race of Latus. 1380

To this guilt I bore witness against myself—
with what eyes shall I look upon my people? 1385

No. If there were a means to choke the fountain
of hearing I would not have stayed my hand
from locking up my miserable carcase,
seeing and hearing nothing; it is sweet
to keep our thoughts out of the range of hurt. 1390

Cithaeron, why did you receive me? why
having received me did you not kill me straight?
And so I had not shown to men my birth.

O Polybus and Corinth and the house,
the old house that I used to call my father's—
what fairness you were nurse to, and what foulness
festered beneath! Now I am found to be 1395

a sinner and a son of sinners. Crossroads,
and hidden glade, oak and the narrow way
at the crossroads, that drank my father's blood
offered you by my hands, do you remember
still what I did as you looked on, and what
I did when I came here? O marriage, marriage! 1400

you bred me and again when you had bred
bred children of your child and showed to men
brides, wives and mothers and the foulest deeds
that can be in this world of ours.

I

Come—it's unfit to say what is unfit
to do.—I beg of you in God's name hide me
somewhere outside your country, yes, or kill me,
or throw me into the sea, to be forever
out of your sight. Approach and deign to touch me
for all my wretchedness, and do not fear.
No man but I can bear my evil doom.

I

Chorus

Here Creon comes in fit time to perform
or give advice in what you ask of us.
Creon is left sole ruler in your stead.

Oedipus

Creon! Creon! What shall I say to him?
How can I justly hope that he will trust me?
In what is past I have been proved towards him
an utter liar.

(Enter Creon.)

Creon

Oedipus, I've come
not so that I might laugh at you nor taunt you
with evil of the past. But if you still
are without shame before the face of men
reverence at least the flame that gives all life,
our Lord the Sun, and do not show unveiled
to him pollution such that neither land
nor holy rain nor light of day can welcome.

(To a servant.)

Be quick and take him in. It is most decent
that only kin should see and hear the troubles
of kin.

Oedipus

I beg you, since you've torn me from
my dreadful expectations and have come
in a most noble spirit to a man
that has used you vilely—do a thing for me.
I shall speak for your own good, not for my own.

Creon

What do you need that you would ask of me?

1435

Oedipus

Drive me from here with all the speed you can
to where I may not hear a human voice.

Creon

Be sure, I would have done this had not I
wished first of all to learn from the God the course
of action I should follow.

Oedipus

But his word
has been quite clear to let the parricide,
the sinner, die.

1440

Creon

Yes, that indeed was said.
But in the present need we had best discover
what we should do.

Oedipus

And will you ask about
a man so wretched?

Creon

Now even you will trust
the God.

1445

Oedipus

So, I command you—and will beseech you—
to her that lies inside that house give burial
as you would have it; she is yours and rightly
you will perform the rites for her. For me—

never let this my father's city have me
living a dweller in it. Leave me live
in the mountains where Cithaeron is, that's called
my mountain, which my mother and my father
while they were living would have made my tomb.
So I may die by their decree who sought
indeed to kill me. Yet I know this much:
no sickness and no other thing will kill me.
I would not have been saved from death if not
for some strange evil fate. Well, let my fate
go where it will.

Creon, you need not care
about my sons; they're men and so wherever
they are, they will not lack a livelihood.
But my two girls—so sad and pitiful—
whose table never stood apart from mine,
and everything I touched they always shared—
O Creon, have a thought for them! And most
I wish that you might suffer me to touch them
and sorrow with them.

(Enter Antigone and Ismene, Oedipus' two daughters.)

O my lord! O true noble Creon! Can I
really be touching them, as when I saw?
What shall I say?
Yes, I can hear them sobbing—my two darlings!
and Creon has had pity and has sent me
what I loved most?
Am I right?

Creon

You're right: it was I gave you this
because I knew from old days how you loved them
as I see now.

Oedipus

God bless you for it, Creon,
and may God guard you better on your road
than he did me!

O children, 1480
 where are you? Come here, come to my hands,
 a brother's hands which turned your father's eyes,
 those bright eyes you knew once, to what you see,
 a father seeing nothing, knowing nothing,
 begetting you from his own source of life. 1485
 I weep for you—I cannot see your faces—
 I weep when I think of the bitterness
 there will be in your lives, how you must live
 before the world. At what assemblages
 of citizens will you make one? to what 1490
 gay company will you go and not come home
 in tears instead of sharing in the holiday?
 And when you're ripe for marriage, who will he be,
 the man who'll risk to take such infamy
 as shall cling to my children, to bring hurt 1495
 on them and those that marry with them? What
 curse is not there? "Your father killed his father
 and sowed the seed where he had sprung himself
 and begot you out of the womb that held him."
 These insults you will hear. Then who will marry you? 1500
 No one, my children; clearly you are doomed
 to waste away in barrenness unmarried.
 Son of Menoeceus, since you are all the father
 left these two girls, and we, their parents, both 1505
 are dead to them—do not allow them wander
 like beggars, poor and husbandless.
 They are of your own blood.
 And do not make them equal with myself
 in wretchedness; for you can see them now
 so young, so utterly alone, save for you only.
 Touch my hand, noble Creon, and say yes. 1510
 If you were older, children, and were wiser,
 there's much advice I'd give you. But as it is,
 let this be what you pray: give me a life

wherever there is opportunity
to live, and better life than was my father's.

Creon

Your tears have had enough of scope; now go within the house.

Oedipus

I must obey, though bitter of heart.

Creon

In season, all is good.

Oedipus

Do you know on what conditions I obey?

Creon

You tell me them,
and I shall know them when I hear.

Oedipus

That you shall send me out
to live away from Thebes.

Creon

That gift you must ask of the God.

Oedipus

But I'm now hated by the Gods.

Creon

So quickly you'll obtain your prayer.

Oedipus

You consent then?

Creon

What I do not mean, I do not use to say.

Oedipus

Now lead me away from here.

Creon

Let go the children, then, and come.

Oedipus

Do not take them from me.

Creon

Do not seek to be master in everything,
for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your
life.

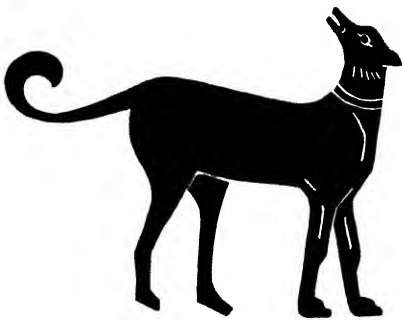
(As Creon and Oedipus go out.)

Chorus

You that live in my ancestral Thebes, behold this Oedipus,—
him who knew the famous riddles and was a man most masterful; 1525
not a citizen who did not look with envy on his lot—
see him now and see the breakers of misfortune swallow him!
Look upon that last day always. Count no mortal happy till
he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain. 1530

OEDIPUS
AT
COLONUS

Translated by
ROBERT FITZGERALD



CHARACTERS

Oedipus

Antigone

A Stranger

Ismene

Theseus

Creon

Polyneices

A Messenger

Chorus

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

Long after he had left Thebes, the blinded OEDIPUS came with ANTIGONE to the Attic deme of COLONUS, where the oracle of Apollo had prophesied that he was to die.

SCENE *Like the theatre, is in the open air. In the background is the grove of the Furies at Colonus in Attica, about a mile northwest of Athens. A statue or stele of Colonus, a legendary horseman and hero, can be seen stage left. Stage right, a flat rock jutting out among the trees of the grove. Downstage, center, another ridge of rock.*

TIME: *Early afternoon of a day about twenty years after the action of King Oedipus.*

SCENE I

(Oedipus, old, blind, bearded and ragged, but carrying himself well, enters stage right, led by Antigone.)

Oedipus

My daughter—daughter of the blind old man—

Where, I wonder, have we come to now?

What place is this, Antigone? What people?

Who will be kind to Oedipus this evening

And give the wanderer charity?

Though he ask little and receive still less,

It is sufficient:

Suffering and time,

Vast time, have been instructors in contentment,

Which kingliness teaches too.

But now, child,

If you can see a place where we might rest,

Some public place or consecrated park,

Let me stop and sit down there.

And then let us inquire where we may be.

5

10

As foreigners and strangers we must learn
From the local people, and do as they direct.

Antigone

Father, poor tired Oedipus, the towers
That crown the city still seem far away;
As for this place, it is clearly a holy one,
Shady with vines and olive trees and laurel;
Snug in their wings within, the nightingales
Make a sweet music.

15

Rest on this rough stone.

It was a long road for an old man to travel.

20

Oedipus

Help me sit down; take care of the blind man.

Antigone

After so long, you need not tell me, father.

Oedipus

And now have you any idea where we are?

Antigone

This place I do not know; the city is Athens.

Oedipus

Yes, everyone we met has told us that.

25

Antigone

Then shall I go and ask?

Oedipus

Do, child, if there is any life near-by.

Antigone

Oh, but indeed there is; I need not leave you;

I see a man, now, not far away from us.

Oedipus

Is he coming this way? Has he started towards us?

30

(*The Stranger enters, left.*)

Antigone

Here he is now.

Say what seems best to you,
Father; the man is here

Oedipus

Friend, my daughter's eyes serve for my own.
She tells me we are fortunate enough to meet you,
And no doubt you will inform us—

35

Stranger

Do not go on;
First move from where you sit; the place is holy;
It is forbidden to walk upon that ground.

Oedipus

What ground is this? What god is honored here?

Stranger

It is not to be touched, no one may live upon it;
Most dreadful are its divinities, most feared,
Daughters of darkness and mysterious earth.

40

Oedipus

Under what solemn name shall I invoke them?

Stranger

The people here prefer to address them as Gentle
All-seeing Ones; elsewhere there are other names.

Oedipus

Then may they be gentle to the suppliant.
For I shall never leave this resting place.

45

Stranger

What is the meaning of this?

Oedipus

It was ordained;
I recognize it now.

Stranger

Without authority
From the city government I dare not move you;
First I must show them what it is you are doing.

Oedipus

Friend, in the name of God, bear with me now!
I turn to you for light; answer the wanderer.

50

Stranger

Speak. You will not find me discourteous.

Oedipus

What is this region into which I've come?

Stranger

Whatever I can tell you, I will tell.
This country, all of it, is blessed ground;
The god of the sea loves it; in it the firecarrier
Prometheus has his influence; in particular
That spot you rest on has been called this earth's
Doorsill of Brass, and buttress of great Athens.
All men of this land claim descent from him
Whose statue stands near-by: Colonus the horseman,
And bear his name in common with their own.
That is this country, stranger: honored less
In histories than in the hearts of the people.

55

60

Oedipus

Then people live in the land?

Stranger

Yes, certainly,

The clan of those descended from that hero.

65

Oedipus

Ruled by a king? Or do the people rule?

Stranger

The land is governed from Athens, by Athens' king.

Oedipus

And who is he whose word has power here?

Stranger

Theseus, son of Aegeus, the king before him.

Oedipus

Ah. Would someone then go to this king for me?

70

Stranger

To tell him what? Perhaps to urge his coming?

Oedipus

To tell him a small favor will gain him much.

Stranger

What service can a blind man render him?

Oedipus

All I shall say will be clear-sighted indeed

Stranger

Listen, stranger I wish you no injury,
You seem well-born, though obviously unlucky,
Stay where you are, exactly where I found you,
And I'll inform the people of what you say—
Not in the town, but here—it rests with them
To decide if you should stay or must move on

75

80

(Exit Stranger, left.)

Oedipus

Child, has he gone?

Antigone

Yes, father. Now you may speak tranquilly,
For only I am with you

Oedipus (praying)

Ladies whose eyes
Are terrible: Spirits: upon your sacred ground
I have first bent my knees in this new land;
Therefore be mindful of me and of Apollo,
For when he gave me oracles of evil,
He also spoke of this:

85

A resting place,
After long years, in the last country, where
I should find home among the sacred Furies:
That there I might round out my bitter life,
Conferring benefit on those who received me,
A curse on those who have driven me away.

90

Portents, he said, would make me sure of this:
Earthquake, thunder, or God's smiling lightning; 95
But I am sure of it now, sure that you guided me
With feathery influence upon this road,
And led me here into your hallowed wood.

How otherwise could I, in my wandering,
Have sat down first with you in all this land, 100
I who drink not, with you who love not wine?

How otherwise had I found this chair of stone?
Grant me then, goddesses, passage from life at last,
And consummation, as the unearthly voice foretold,
Unless indeed I seem not worth your grace:
Slave as I am to such unending pain 105
As no man had before.

O hear my prayer,
Sweet children of original Darkness! Hear me,
Athens, city named for great Athena,
Honored above all cities in the world!
Pity a man's poor carcase and his ghost,
For Oedipus is not the strength he was. 110

Antigone

Be still. Some elderly men are coming this way,
Looking for the place where you are seated.

Oedipus

I shall be still. You get me clear of the path,
And hide me in the wood, so I may hear
What they are saying. If we know their temper 115
We shall be better able to act with prudence.

(Oedipus and Antigone withdraw into the grove.)

CHORAL DIALOGUE

*(The Chorus enters from the left. Here, and throughout the
play, its lines may be taken by various members as
seems suitable.)*

Chorus

Look for him Who could he be? Where
Is he? Where is the stranger
Impious, blasphemous, shameless! 120
Use your eyes, search him out!
Cover the ground and uncover him!
Vagabond!
The old man must be a vagabond,
Not of our land, for he'd never 125
Otherwise dare to go in there,
In the inviolate thicket
Of those whom it's futile to fight,
Those whom we tremble to name.
When we pass we avert our eyes—
Close our eyes!— 130
In silence, without conversation,
Shaping our prayers with our lips.
But now, if the story is credible,
Some alien fool has profaned it;
Yet I have looked over all the grove and 135
Still cannot see him;
Cannot say where he has hidden.

(Oedipus comes forward from the wood.)

Oedipus

That stranger is I. As they say of the blind,
Sounds are the things I see.

Chorus

Ah! 140
His face is dreadful! His voice is dreadful!

Oedipus

Do not regard me, please, as a law-breaker.

Chorus

Zeus defend us, who is this old man?

Oedipus

One whose fate is not quite to be envied,

O my masters, and men of this land; 145
That must be evident: why, otherwise,
Should I need this girl
To lead me, her frailty to put my weight on?

Chorus

Ah! His eyes are blind! 150
And were you brought into the world so?
Unhappy life—and so long!
Well, not if I can help it,
Will you have this curse besides.—

Stranger! you 155
Trespass there! But beyond there,
In the glade where the grass is still,
Where the honeyed libations drip
In the rill from the brimming spring,
You must not step! O stranger, 160
It is well to be careful about it!

Most careful!
Stand aside and come down then!
There is too much space between us!
Say, wanderer, can you hear? 165
If you have a mind to tell us
Your business, or wish to converse with our council,
Come down from that place!
Only speak where it's proper to do so!

Oedipus

Now, daughter, what is the way of wisdom? 170

Antigone

We must do just as they do here, father;
We should give in now, and listen to them.

Oedipus

Stretch out your hand to me.

Antigone

There, I am near you.

Oedipus

Sirs, let there be no injustice done me,
Once I have trusted you, and left my refuge.

175

(Led by Antigone, he starts downstage.)

Chorus

Never, never, will anyone drive you away
From rest in this land, old man!

Oedipus

Shall I come further?

Chorus

Yes, further.

Oedipus

And now?

Chorus

You must guide him, girl;
You can see how much further to come.

180

Antigone

Come with your blind step, father;
This way; come where I lead you.

Chorus

Though the land is strange, newcomer,
You've weathered much; take heart;
What the state has long held hateful,
Hate, and respect what it loves.

185

Oedipus

Lead me on, then, child,
To where we may speak or listen respectfully;
Let us not fight necessity.

190

Chorus

Now! Go no further than that platform there,
Formed of the natural rock.

Oedipus

This?

Chorus

Far enough; you can hear us.

Oedipus

Shall I sit down?

Chorus

Yes, sit there

195

To the left on the ridge of the rock.

Antigone

Father, this is where I can help you;

You must keep step with me, gently now.

Oedipus

Ah, me!

Antigone

Lean your old body on my arm;

200

It is I who love you; let yourself down.

Oedipus

How bitter blindness is!

(He is seated on the rock downstage, center.)

Chorus

Now that you are at rest, poor man,

Tell us, what is your name?

Who are you, wanderer?

205

What is the land of your ancestors?

Oedipus

I am an exile, friends; but do not ask me . . .

Chorus

What is it you fear to say, old man?

Oedipus

No, no, no! Do not go on

210

Questioning me! Do not ask my name!

Chorus

Why not?

Oedipus

My star was unspeakable

Chorus

Speak!

Oedipus

My child, what can I say to them?

Chorus

Answer us, stranger; what is your race,
Who was your father?

215

Oedipus

God help me, what will become of me, child?

Antigone

Tell them; there is no other way.

Oedipus

Well, then, I will; I cannot hide it.

Chorus

Between you, you greatly delay. Speak up!

Oedipus

Have you heard of Laius' family?

Chorus

Ah!

220

Oedipus

Of the race of Labdacidae?

Chorus

Ah, Zeus!

Oedipus

And ruined Oedipus?

Chorus

You are he!

Oedipus

Do not take fright from what I say—

Chorus

Oh, dreadful!

Oedipus

I am accursed.

Chorus

Oh, fearful!

Oedipus

Antigone, what will happen now?

225

Chorus

Away with you! Out with you! Leave our country!

Oedipus

And what of the promises you made me?

Chorus

God will not punish the man
Who makes return for an injury.

Deceivers may be deceived:

230

They play a game that ends

In grief, and not in pleasure.

Leave this grove at once!

Our country is not for you!

Wind no further

235

Your clinging evil upon us!

Antigone

O men of reverent mind!

Since you will not suffer my father,

Old man though he is,

And though you know his story—

He never knew what he did—

240

Take pity still on my unhappiness,

And let me intercede with you for him.

Not with lost eyes, but looking in your eyes

As if I were a child of yours, I beg

245

Mercy for him, the beaten man! O hear me!

We are thrown upon your mercy as on God's;

Be kinder than you seem!

By all you have and own that is dear to you:

Children, wives, possessions, gods, I pray you!

250

For you will never see in all the world
A man whom God has led
Escape his destiny!

SCENE 2

Chorus

Child of Oedipus, indeed we pity you,
Just as we pity him for his misfortune; 255
But we tremble to think of what the gods may do;
We could not dare to speak more generously!

Oedipus

What use is reputation then? What good
Comes of a noble name? A noble fiction!
For Athens, so they say, excels in piety; 260
Has power to save the wretched of other lands;
Can give them refuge; is unique in this.
Yet, when it comes to me, where is her refuge?
You pluck me from these rocks and cast me out,
All for fear of a name!

Or do you dread 265
My strength? my actions? I think not, for I
Suffered those deeds more than I acted them,
As I might show if it were fitting here
To tell my father's and my mother's story . . .
For which you fear me, as I know too well.

And yet, how was I evil in myself? 270
I had been wronged, I retaliated; even had I
Known what I was doing, was that evil?
Then, knowing nothing, I went on. Went on.
But those who wronged me knew, and ruined me.

Therefore I beg of you before the gods, 275
For the same cause that made you move me—
In reverence of your gods—give me this shelter,
And thus accord those powers what is theirs.
Think: their eyes are fixed upon the just,

Fixed on the unjust, too; no impious man
Can twist away from them forever. 280

Now, in their presence, do not blot your city's
Luster by bending to unholy action;
As you would receive an honest petitioner,
Give me, too, sanctuary; though my face 285
Be dreadful in its look, yet honor me!

For I come here as one endowed with grace
By those who are over Nature; and I bring
Advantage to this race, as you may learn
More fully when some lord of yours is here 290
Meanwhile be careful to be just.

Chorus

Old man,
This argument of yours compels our wonder.
It was not feebly worded. I am content
That higher authorities should judge this matter. 295

Oedipus

And where is he who rules the land, strangers?

Chorus

In his father's city; but the messenger
Who sent us here has gone to fetch him also.

Oedipus

Do you think a blind man will so interest him
As to bring him such a distance? 300

Chorus

I do, indeed, when he has heard your name.

Oedipus

But who will tell him that?

Chorus

It is a long road, and the rumors of travellers
Have a way of wandering. He will have word of them;
Take heart—he will be here. Old man, your name 305

Has gone over all the earth; though he may be
At rest when the news comes, he will come quickly.

Oedipus

Then may he come with luck for his own city,
As well as for me. . . . The good befriend themselves.

Antigone

O Zeus! What shall I say? How interpret this? 310

Oedipus

Antigone, my dear child, what is it?

Antigone

A woman

Riding a Sicilian pony and coming towards us;
She is wearing the wide Thessalian sun-hat;
I don't know! 315

Is it or isn't it? Or am I dreaming?
I think so; yes!—No. I can't be sure. . . .

Ah, poor child,
It is no one else but she! And she is smiling 320
Now as she comes! It is my dear Ismene!

Oedipus

What did you say, child?

(*Ismene enters, with one Attendant.*)

Antigone

That I see your daughter!

My sister! Now you can tell her by her voice.

Ismene

O father and sister together! Dearest voices!
Now I have found you—how, I scarcely know— 325
I don't know how I shall see you through my tears!

Oedipus

Child, you have come?

Ismene

Father, how old you seem!

Oedipus

Child, are you here?

Ismene

And such a time I had!

Oedipus

Touch me, little one.

Ismene

I shall hold you both!

Oedipus

My children . . . and sisters.

Ismene

Oh, unhappy people!

330

Oedipus

She and I?

Ismene

And I with you, unhappy.

Oedipus

But, child, why have you come?

Ismene

For your sake, father.

Oedipus

You missed me?

Ismene

Yes; and I have news for you.

I came with the one person I could trust.

Oedipus

Why, where are your brothers? Could they not do it?

335

Ismene

They are—where they are. It is a hard time for them.

Oedipus

Ah! They behave as if they were Egyptians,

Bred the Egyptian way! Down there, the men

Sit indoors all day long, weaving;

The women go out and attend to business.

340

Just so your brothers, who should have done this work

Sit by the fire like home-loving girls,
And you two, in their place, must bear my hardships.

One, since her childhood ended and her body
Gained its power, has wandered ever with me, 345
An old man's governess, often in the wild
Forest going without shoes, and hungry,
Beaten by many rains, tired by the sun; 350
Yet she rejected the sweet life of home
So that her father should have sustenance.

And you, my daughter, once before came out,
Unknown to Thebes, bringing me news of all
The oracle had said concerning me; 355
And you remained my faithful outpost there,
When I was driven from that land.

But now,
What news, Ismene, do you bring your father?
Why have you left your house to make this journey?
You came for no light reason, I know that;
It must be something serious for me. 360

Ismene

I will pass over the troubles I have had
Searching for your whereabouts, father.
They were hard enough to bear; and I will not
Go through it all again in telling of them.
In any case, it is your sons' troubles 365
That I have come to tell you.
First it was their desire, as it was Creon's,
That the throne should pass to him; that thus the city
Should be defiled no longer: such was their reasoning
When they considered our people's ancient curse
And how it enthralled your pitiful family. 370
But then some fury put it in their hearts—
O pitiful again!—to itch for power:
For seizure of prerogative and throne;
And it was the younger and the less mature

Who stripped his elder brother, Polyneices, 375
Of place and kingship, and then banished him.

But now the people hear he has gone to Argos,
Into the valley land, has joined that nation,
And is enlisting friends among its warriors,
Telling them Argos shall honorably win 380
Thebes and her plain, or else eternal glory.
This is not a mere recital, father;
But terrible truth!

How long will it be, I wonder,
Before the gods take pity on your distress?

Oedipus
You have some hope then that they are concerned 385
With my deliverance?

Ismene
I have, father.
The latest sentences of the oracle . . .

Oedipus
How are they worded? What do they prophesy?

Ismene
That you shall be much solicited by our people
Before your death—and after—for their welfare. 390

Oedipus
And what could anyone hope from such as I?

Ismene
The oracles declare their strength's in you—

Oedipus
When I am finished, I suppose I am strong!

Ismene
For the gods who threw you down sustain you now.

Oedipus
Slight favor, now I am old! My doom was early. 395

Ismene

The proof of it is that Creon is coming to you
For that same reason, and soon: not by and by.

Oedipus

To do what, daughter? Tell me about this.

Ismene

To settle you near the land of Thebes, and so
Have you at hand; but you may not cross the border. 400

Oedipus

What good am I to them outside the country?

Ismene

It is merely that if your burial were unlucky,
That would be perilous for them.

Oedipus

Ah, then!

No god's assistance is needed in comprehending.

Ismene

Therefore they want to keep you somewhere near,
Just at the border, where you'll not be free. 405

Oedipus

And will they compose my shade with Theban dust?

Ismene

Ah, father! No. Your father's blood forbids it.

Oedipus

Then they shall never hold me in their power!

Ismene

If so, some day it will be bitter for them.

Oedipus

How will that be, my child?

Ismene

When they shall stand 410
Where you are buried, and feel your anger there.

Oedipus

What you have said—from whom did you hear it, child?

Ismene

The envoys told me when they returned from Delphi.

Oedipus

Then all this about me was spoken there?

Ismene

According to those men, just come to Thebes.

415

Oedipus

Has either of my sons had word of this?

Ismene

They both have, and they understand it well

Oedipus

The scoundrels! So they knew all this, and yet
Would not give up the throne to have me back?

Ismene

It hurts me to hear it, but I can't deny it.

420

Oedipus

Gods!

Put not their fires of ambition out!

Let the last word be mine upon this battle

They are about to join, with the spears lifting!

I'd see that the one who holds the sceptre now

425

Would not have power long, nor would the other,

The banished one, return!

These were the two

Who saw me in disgrace and banishment

And never lifted a hand for me. They heard me

Howled from the country, heard the thing proclaimed!

430

And will they say I wanted exile then,

An appropriate clemency, granted by the state?

That is all false! The truth is that at first

My mind was a boiling caldron; nothing so sweet
 As death, death by stoning, could have been given me; 435
 Yet no one there would grant me that desire.
 It was only later, when my madness cooled,
 And I had begun to think my rage excessive,
 My punishment too great for what I had done;
 Then it was that the city—in its good time!— 440
 Decided to be harsh, and drove me out.
 They could have helped me then, they could have
 Helped him who begot them! Would they do it?
 For lack of a little word from that fine pair
 Out I went, like a beggar, to wander forever! 445
 Only by grace of these two girls, unaided,
 Have I got food or shelter or devotion;
 The others held their father of less worth
 Than sitting on a throne and being king.
 Well, they shall never win me in their fight! 450
 Nor will they profit from the rule of Thebes.
 I am sure of that; I have heard the prophecies
 Brought by this girl; I think they fit those others
 Spoken so long ago, and now fulfilled.
 So let Creon be sent to find me. Creon, 455
 Or any other of influence in the state.
 If you men here consent—as do those powers
 Holy and awful, the spirits of this place—
 To give me refuge, then shall this city have
 A great savior; and woe to my enemies! 460

Chorus

Oedipus: you are surely worth our pity:
 You, and your children, too. And since you claim
 Also to be a savior of our land,
 I'd like to give you counsel for good luck.

Oedipus

Dear friend! I'll do whatever you advise. 465

Chorus

Make expiation to these divinities
Whose ground you violated when you came.

Oedipus

In what way shall I do so? Tell me, friends.

Chorus

First you must bring libations from the spring
That runs forever; and bring them with clean hands.

470

Oedipus

And when I have that holy water, then?

Chorus

There are some bowls there, by a skillful potter;
Put chaplets round the brims, over the handles.

Oedipus

Of myrtle springs, or woollen stuff, or what?

Chorus

Take the fleeces cropped from a young lamb.

475

Oedipus

Just so; then how must I perform the rite?

Chorus

Facing the quarter of the morning light,
Pour your libations out.

Oedipus

Am I to pour them from the bowls you speak of?

Chorus

In three streams, yes; the last one, empty it.

Oedipus

With what should it be filled? Tell me this, too.

480

Chorus

With water and honey; but with no wine added.

Oedipus

And when the leaf-dark earth receives it?

Chorus

Lay three times nine young shoots of olive on it
With both your hands; meanwhile repeat this prayer:

Oedipus

This I am eager to hear: it has great power.

485

Chorus

That as we call them Eumenides,
Which means the gentle of heart,
May they accept with gentleness
The suppliant and his wish.

So you, or he who prays for you, address them;

But do not speak aloud or raise a cry;
Then come away, and do not turn again.

490

If you will do all this, I shall take heart
And stand up for you; otherwise, O stranger,
I should be seriously afraid for you.

Oedipus

Children, you hear the words of these good people?

Antigone

Yes; now tell us what we ought to do.

Oedipus

It need not be performed by me; I'm far
From having the strength or sight for it—I have neither.

495

Let one of you go and carry out the ritual,
One soul, I think, often can make atonement
For many others, if it be sincere.

Now do it quickly.—Yet do not leave me alone!
I could not move without the help of someone.

500

Ismene

I'll go and do it. But where am I to go?
Where shall I find the holy place, I wonder?

Chorus

On the other side of the wood, girl. If you need it, 505
You may get help from the attendant there.

Ismene

I am going now. Antigone, you'll stay
And care for father. Even if it were hard,
I should not think it so, since it is for him.

(Ismene goes out, right. The chorus draws nearer to Oedipus.)

CHORAL DIALOGUE

Chorus

What evil things have slept since long ago 510
It is not sweet to awaken;
And yet I long to be told—

Oedipus

What?

Chorus

Of that heartbreak for which there was no help,
The pain you have had to suffer.

Oedipus

For kindness' sake, do not open 515
My old wound, and my shame.

Chorus

It is told everywhere, and never dies;
I only want to hear it truly told.

Oedipus

Ah! Ah!

Chorus

Consent I beg you;
Give me my wish, and I shall give you yours. 520

Oedipus

I had to face a thing most terrible,
Not willed by me, I swear;
I would have abhorred it all.

Chorus

So?

Oedipus

Though I did not know, Thebes married me to evil;
Fate and I were joined there.

525

Chorus

Then it was indeed your mother
With whom the thing was done?

Oedipus

Ah! It is worse than death to have to hear it!
Strangers! Yes: and these two girls of mine . . .

530

Chorus

Go on—

Oedipus

These luckless two
Were given birth by her who gave birth to me.

Chorus

These then are daughters; they are also—

Oedipus

Sisters: yes, their father's sisters . . .

535

Chorus

Ah, pity!

Oedipus

Pity, indeed. What throngs
Of pities come into my mind!

Chorus

You suffered—

Oedipus

Yes, unspeakably.

Chorus

You sinned—

Oedipus

No, I did not sin!

Chorus

How not?

Oedipus

I thought

Of her as my reward. Ah, would I had never won it!

540

Would I had never served the State that day!

Chorus

Unhappy man—and you also killed—

Oedipus

What is it now? What are you after?

Chorus

Killed your father!

Oedipus

God in heaven!

You strike again where I am hurt.

Chorus

You killed him.

Oedipus

Killed him. Yet, there is—

545

Chorus

What more?

Oedipus

A just extenuation.

This:

I did not know him; and he wished to murder me.

Before the law—before God—I am innocent!

(The Chorus turns at the approach of Theseus.)

SCENE 3

Chorus

The king is coming! Aegeus' eldest son,

Theseus: news of you has brought him here.

550

(Theseus enters with soldiers, left.)

Theseus

In the old time I often heard men tell
Of the bloody extinction of your eyes.
Even if on my way I were not informed,
I'd recognize you, son of Laius.
The garments and the tortured face 555
Make plain your identity. I am sorry for you.
And I should like to know what favor here
You hope for from the city and from me:
Both you and your unfortunate companion.
Tell me. It would be something dire indeed 560
To make me leave you comfortless; for I
Too was an exile I grew up abroad,
And in strange lands I fought as few men have
With danger and with death.
Therefore no wanderer shall come, as you do, 565
And be denied my audience or aid.
I know I am only a man; I have no more
To hope for in the end than you have.

Oedipus

Theseus, in those few words your nobility
Is plain to me. I need not speak at length; 570
You have named me and my father accurately,
Spoken with knowledge of my land and exile.
There is, then, nothing left for me to tell
But my desire; and then the tale is ended.

Theseus

Tell me your wish, then; let me hear it now. 575

Oedipus

I come to give you something, and the gift
Is my own beaten self: no feast for the eyes;
Yet in me is a more lasting grace than beauty.

Theseus

What grace is this you say you bring to us?

Oedipus

In time you'll learn, but not immediately.

580

Theseus

How long, then, must we wait to be enlightened?

Oedipus

Until I am dead, and you have buried me.

Theseus

Your wish is burial? What of your life meanwhile?
Have you forgotten that?—or do you care?

Oedipus

It is all implicated in my burial.

585

Theseus

But this is a brief favor you ask of me.

Oedipus

See to it, nevertheless! It is not simple.

Theseus

You mean I shall have trouble with your sons?

Oedipus

Those people want to take me back there now.

Theseus

Will you not go? Is exile admirable?

590

Oedipus

No. When I would have returned, they would not have it.

Theseus

What childishness! You are surely in no position—

Oedipus

When you know me, rebuke me; not till then!

Theseus

Well, tell me more. I must not speak in ignorance.

Oedipus

Theseus, I have been wounded more than once.

595

Theseus

Is it your family's curse that you refer to?

Oedipus

Not merely that; for all Greece buzzes with it.

Theseus

Then what is the wound that is so pitiless?

Oedipus

Think how it is with me. I was expelled
From my own land by my own sons; and now,
As a parricide, my return is not allowed.

600

Theseus

How can they summon you, if this is so?

Oedipus

The sacred oracle compels them to.

Theseus

They fear some punishment from his forebodings?

Oedipus

They fear they will be struck down in this land!

605

Theseus

And how could war arise between these nations?

Oedipus

Most gentle son of Aegeus! The immortal
Gods alone have neither age nor death!
All other things almighty Time disquiets.
Earth wastes away; the body wastes away;
Faith dies; distrust is born.

610

And imperceptibly the spirit changes
Between a man and his friend, or between two cities
For some men soon, for others in later time,
Their pleasure sickens; or love comes again.
And so with you and Thebes: the sweet season
Holds between you now; but time goes on,
Unmeasured Time, fathering numberless

615

Nights, unnumbered days: and on one day
They'll break apart with spears this harmony— 620
All for a trivial word.

And then my sleeping and long-hidden corpse,
Cold in the earth, will drink hot blood of theirs,
If Zeus endures; if his son's word is true . . .

However: there's no felicity in speaking
Of hidden things. Let me come back to this. 625
Be careful that you keep your word to me;
For if you do you'll never say of Oedipus
That he was given refuge uselessly—
Or if you say it, then the gods have lied.

Chorus

My lord: before you came this man gave promise
Of having power to make his words come true. 630

Theseus

Who would reject his friendship? Is he not
One who would have, in any case, an ally's
Right to our hospitality?
Moreover he has asked grace of our deities,
And offers no small favor in return. 635
As I value that favor, I shall not refuse
This man's desire; I declare him a citizen.

And if it should please our friend to remain here,
I direct you to take care of him;
Or else he may come with me.

Whatever you choose,
Oedipus, we shall be happy to accord. 640
You know your own needs best; I accede to them.

Oedipus

May God bless men like these!

Theseus

What do you say then? Shall it be my house?

Oedipus

If it were right for me. But the place is here . . .

Theseus

And what will you do here?—Not that I oppose you.

645

Oedipus

Here I shall prevail over those who banished me.

Theseus

Your presence, as you say, is a great blessing.

Oedipus

If you are firm in doing what you promise.

Theseus

You can be sure of me; I'll not betray you.

Oedipus

I'll not ask pledges, as I would of scoundrels.

650

Theseus

You'd get no more assurance than by my word.

Oedipus

I wonder how you will behave?

Theseus

You fear?

Oedipus

That men will come—

Theseus

These men will attend to them.

Oedipus

Look: when you leave me—

Theseus

I know what to do!

Oedipus

I am oppressed by fear!

Theseus

I feel no fear.

655

Oedipus

You do not know the menace!

Theseus

I do know

No man is going to take you against my will.

Angry men are liberal with threats

And bluster generally. When the mind

Is master of itself, threats are no matter.

660

These people may have dared to talk quite fiercely

Of taking you; perhaps, as I rather think,

They'll find a sea of troubles in the way.

Therefore I should advise you to take heart.

Even aside from me and my intentions,

Did not Apollo send and guide you here?

665

However it may be, I can assure you,

While I'm away, my name will be your shield.

(Exit Theseus and soldiers. The Chorus turns to the audience.)

CHORAL POEM

Chorus

The land beloved of horsemen, fair

Colonus takes a guest;

He shall not seek another home,

670

For this, in all the earth and air,

Is most secure and loveliest.

In the god's untrodden vale

Where leaves and berries throng,

And wine-dark ivy climbs the bough,

The sweet, sojourning nightingale

Murmurs all day long.

675

No sun nor wind may enter there

Nor the winter's rain;

But ever through the shadow goes

Dionysus reveler,

Immortal maenads in his train.

680

Here with drops of heaven's dew
At daybreak all the year,
The clusters of narcissus bloom,
Time-hallowed garlands for the brows
Of those great ladies whom we fear. 685

The crocus like a little sun
Blooms with its yellow ray;
The river's fountains are awake,
And his nomadic streams that run
Unthinned forever, and never stay; 690

But like perpetual lovers move
On the maternal land.
And here the choiring Muses come,
And the divinity of love
With the gold reins in her hand.

*(The Chorus may now shift its grouping or otherwise
indicate a change of theme.)*

Chorus

And our land has a thing unknown
On Asia's sounding coast 695
Or in the sea-surrounded west
Where Agamemnon's race has sway:
The olive, fertile and self-sown,
The terror of our enemies
That no hand tames nor tears away—
The blessed tree that never dies!—
But it will mock the swordsman in his rage.

Ah, how it flourishes in every field,
Most beautifully here! 700
The gray-leaved tree, the children's nourisher!
No young man nor one partnered by his age
Knows how to root it out nor make
Barren its yield;
For Zeus the Father smiles on it with sage

Eyes that forever are awake, 705
And Pallas watches with her sea-pale eyes.

Last and grandest praise I sing
To Athens, nurse of men,
For her great pride and for the splendor
Destiny has conferred on her 710
Land from which fine horses spring!
Land where foals are beautiful!
Land of the sea and the sea-farer!
Upon whose lovely littoral
The god of the sea moves, the son of Time.

That lover of our land I praise again,
Who found our horsemen fit
For first bestowal of the curb and bit, 715
To discipline the stallion in his prime,
And strokes to which our oarsmen sing,
Well-fitted, oak and men,
Whose long sea-oars in wondrous rhyme
Flash from the salt foam, following
The hundred-footed sea-wind and the gull.

*(At the conclusion of this, Antigone is standing stage
right, looking off-stage attentively.)*

SCENE 4

Antigone

Land so well spoken of and praised so much! 720
Now is the time to show those words are true.

Oedipus

What now, my child?

Antigone (returning to him)

A man is coming towards us,
And it is Creon—not unaccompanied, father.

Oedipus

Most kindly friends! I hope you may give proof,
And soon, of your ability to protect me! 725

Chorus

Don't be afraid: you'll see. I may be old,
But the nation's strength has not grown old.

(Enter Creon, right, with guards)

Creon

Gentlemen, and citizens of this land:

I can see from your eyes that my arrival
Has been a cause of sudden fear to you;
Do not be fearful. And say nothing hostile!
I have not come for any hostile action,
For I am old, and know this city has
Power, if any city in Hellas has.

730

But for this man here: I, despite my age,
Am sent to bring him to the land of Thebes.
This is not one man's mission, but was ordered
By the whole Theban people. I am their emissary
Because it fell to me as a relative
To mourn his troubles more than anyone.

735

So, now, poor Oedipus, come home.
You have heard my message. The people of the city
Are right in summoning you—I most of all,
For most of all, unless I am worst of men,
I grieve for your unhappiness, old man.

740

I see you ravaged as you are, a stranger
Everywhere, never at rest,

745

With only a girl to serve you in your need.—

I never thought she'd fall to such indignity,

Poor child! And yet she has;

750

Forever tending you, leading a beggar's

Life with you; a grown-up girl who knows

Nothing of marriage; whoever comes can take her. . . .

Is not this a disgrace? I weep to see it!

Disgrace for you, for me, for all our people!

We cannot hide what is so palpable,

755

But you, if you will listen to me, Oedipus—

And in the name of your father's gods, listen!—
Bury the whole thing now, agree with me
To go back to your city and your home!

Take friendly leave of Athens, for she deserves it;
But you should have more reverence for Thebes,
Since long ago she was your kindly nurse

760

Oedipus

You brazen rascal! Playing your rascal's tricks
In righteous speeches, as you always would!
Why do you try it? How can you think to take me
Into that snare I should so hate if taken?

That time when I was sick with my private
Agony. when I would lightly have left the earth—
You had no mind to give me what I wanted!
But when at long last I had had my fill
Of rage and grief, and in my quiet house
Began to find some comfort: that was the time
You chose to rout me out.

765

How precious was this kinship to you then?
It is the same thing now: you see this city
And all its people being kind to me,
So you attempt to coax me away from them!
A cruel thing, for all your soothing words.

770

What pleasure is there in being amiable
To those who do not want your amiability?

775

Suppose that when you wanted something terribly
A man should neither grant it you nor give
Sympathy even; but later when you were glutted
With all your heart's desire, should give it then,
When charity was no charity at all?
Would you not think the kindness somewhat hollow?
That is the sort of kindness you offer me:
Generous in words, but in reality evil.

780

Now I will tell these men, and prove you evil.
 You come to take me, but not to take me home;
 Rather to settle me outside the city
 So that the city may escape my curse, 785
 Escape from punishment by Athens.

Yes;

But you'll not have it. What you'll have is this:
 My vengeance active in that land forever;
 And what my sons will have of my old kingdom
 Is just so much room as they need to die in! 790

Now who knows better the destiny of Thebes?
 I do, for I have had the best informants:
 Apollo, and Zeus himself who is his father.
 And yet you come here with your fraudulent speech
 All whetted up! The more you talk, the more 795
 Harm, not good, you'll get by it!—
 However, I know you'll never believe that.—

Only leave us! Let us live here in peace!
 Is it a bad life, if it gives us pleasure?

Creon

Which of us do you consider is more injured 800
 By talk like this? You hurt only yourself.

Oedipus

I am perfectly content, so long as you
 Can neither wheedle me nor fool these others.

Creon

Unhappy man! Shall it be plain that time
 Brings you no wisdom? that you shame your age? 805

Oedipus

What repartee! I know no honest man
 Able to speak so well under all conditions!

Creon

To speak much is one thing; to speak to the point's another!

Oedipus

As if you spoke so little but so fittingly!

Creon

No, not fittingly for a mind like yours!

810

Oedipus

Go away! I speak for these men also!

Stop busybodying here where I must live!

Creon

I call on these—not you!—as witnesses

Of what rejoinder you have made to friends.—

If I ever take you—

Oedipus

With these men fighting for me,

Who is going to take me by violence?

815

Creon

You'll have pain enough without that, I promise you!

Oedipus

What are you up to? What is behind that brag?

Creon

Your two daughters: one of them I have just now

Had seized and carried off, and I'll take this one!

Oedipus

Ah!

Creon

You'll soon have better reason to groan about it!

820

Oedipus

You have my child?

Creon

And this one in a moment!

Oedipus

Ah, friends! What will you do? Will you betray me?

Are you not going to drive this thief away?

Chorus

Go, stranger! Off with you! You have no right
To do what you are doing, or what you have done!

825

Creon (to Guards)

You there: it would be well to take her now,
Whether she wants to go with you or not.

(Two Guards approach Antigone.)

Antigone

Oh, God, where shall I run? What help is there
From gods or men?

Chorus

What are you doing, stranger?

Creon

I will not touch this man; only her who is mine.

830

Oedipus

O masters of this land!

Chorus

This is unjust!

Creon

No, just!

Chorus

Why so?

Creon

I take what belongs to me!

Oedipus

O Athens!

(The Guards pinion Antigone's arms)

Chorus

What are you doing, stranger? Will you
Let her go? Must we have a test of strength?

835

Creon

Hold off!

Chorus

Not while you persist in doing this!

Creon

Your city will have war if you hurt me!

Oedipus

Did I not proclaim this?

Chorus (to Guards)

Take your hands

Off the child at once!

Creon

What you cannot enforce,

Do not command!

Chorus

I tell you, let go!

Creon

And I tell you—on your way!

840

(The Guards pull Antigone toward the right.)

Chorus

Help! Here, men of Colonus! Help! Help!

The city, my city, is pillaged!

Hurry! Help, ho!

Antigone

They drag me away. How wretched! O friends, friends!

Oedipus (groping)

Where are you, child?

Antigone

They have overpowered me!

845

Oedipus

Give me your hands, little one!

Antigone

I cannot do it!

Creon (to Guards)

Will you get on with her?

(They go out, right.)

Oedipus

God help me now!

Creon

With these two sticks at any rate you'll never
Guide yourself again! But since you wish
To conquer your own people—by whose command, 850
Though I am royal, I have performed this act—
Go on and conquer! Later, I think, you'll learn
That now as before you have done yourself no good
By gratifying your temper against your friends!
Anger has always been your greatest sin! 855

Chorus (approaching Creon)

Control yourself, stranger!

Creon

Don't touch me, I say!

Chorus

I'll not release you! Those two girls were stolen!

Creon

By God, I'll have more booty in a moment
To bring my city! I'll not stop with them!

Chorus

Now what are you about?

Creon

I'll take him, too! 860

Chorus

A terrible thing to say!

Creon

It will be done!

Chorus

Not if the ruler of our land can help it!

Oedipus

Voice of shamelessness! Will you touch me?

Creon

Silence, I say!

Oedipus

No! May the powers here
Not make me silent until I say this curse: 865
You scoundrel, who have cruelly taken her
Who served my naked eyepits as their eyes!
On you and yours forever may the sun god,
Watcher of all the world, confer such days
As I have had, and such an age as mine! 870

Creon

Do you see this, citizens of this country?

Oedipus

They see both me and you; and they see also
That when I am hurt I have only words to avenge it!

Creon

I'll not stand for it longer! Alone as I am,
And slow with age, I'll try my strength to take him! 875

(Creon goes slowly toward Oedipus.)

Oedipus

Ah!

Chorus

You are a bold man, friend,
If you think you can do this!

Creon

I do think so!

Chorus

If you could do it, our city would be finished!

Creon

In a just cause the weak will beat the strong! 880

Oedipus

You hear his talk?

Chorus

By Zeus, he shall not do it!

Creon

Zeus may determine that, but you will not.

Chorus

Is this not criminal!

Creon (laying hold of Oedipus)

If so, you'll bear it!

Chorus

Ho, everyone! Captains, ho!

Hurry up! Come on the run!

885

They are well on their way by now!

(Theseus enters, left, with armed men)

Theseus

Why do you shout? What is the matter here?

Of what are you afraid?

You have interrupted me as I was sacrificing

To the great god of the sea, Colonus's patron.

Tell me everything, so I may know;

I do not care to make such haste for nothing.

890

Oedipus

O dearest friend—I recognize your voice—

A despicable thing has just been done to me!

Theseus

What is it? Who is the man who did it? Tell me.

Oedipus

This Creon has had my daughters bound and stolen.

895

Theseus

What's that you say?

Oedipus

Yes; now you know my loss.

Theseus (to his men)

One of you go on the double

To the altar place and rouse the people there;

Make them leave the sacrifice at once

And run full speed, both foot and cavalry

As hard as they can gallop, for the place

900

Where the two highways come together.

The girls must not be permitted to pass there,
Or I will be a laughing-stock to this fellow,
As if I were a man to be handled roughly!
Go on, do as I tell you! Quick!

(Exit Soldier, left.)

This fellow—

If I should act in anger, as he deserves, 905
I wouldn't let him go without chastisement;
But he shall be subject to the sort of laws
He has himself imported here.—

(To Creon)

You: you shall never leave this land of Attica
Until you produce those girls here in my presence; 910
For your behavior is an affront to me,
A shame to your own people and your nation.

You come to a city-state that practices justice,
A state that rules by law, and by law only;
And yet you cast aside her authority, 915
Take what you please, and worse, by violence,
As if you thought there were no men among us,
Or only slaves; and as if I were nobody.

I doubt that Thebes is responsible for you:
She has no propensity for breeding rascals. 920
And Thebes would not applaud you if she knew
You tried to trick me and to rob the gods
By dragging helpless people from their sanctuary!

Were I a visitor in your country—
No matter how immaculate my claims— 925
Without consent from him who ruled the land,
Whoever he might be, I'd take nothing.
I think I have some notion of the conduct
Proper to one who visits a friendly city.
You bring disgrace upon an honorable
Land—your own land, too; a long life 930
Seems to have left you witless as you are old.

I said it once and say it now again:
 Someone had better bring those girls here quickly,
 Unless you wish to prolong your stay with us
 Under close guard, and not much liking it. 935
 This is not just a speech; I mean it, friend.

Chorus

Now do you see where you stand? Thebes is just,
 But you are adjudged to have acted wickedly.

Creon

It was not that I thought this state unmanly,
 Son of Aegeus; nor ill-governed, either; 940
 Rather I did this thing in the opinion
 That no one here would love my citizens
 So tenderly as to keep them against my will . . .
 And surely, I thought, no one would give welcome
 To an unholy man, a parricide, 945
 A man with whom his mother had been found!
 Such at least was my estimate of the wisdom
 Native to the Areopagus; I thought
 Athens was not a home for such exiles.
 In that belief I considered him my prize. 950
 Even so, I'd not have touched him had he not
 Called down curses on my race and me;
 That was an injury that deserved reprisal.
 There is no old age for a man's anger,
 Only death; the dead cannot be hurt. 955
 You'll do whatever you wish in this affair,
 For even though my case is right and just,
 I am weak, without support. Nevertheless,
 Old as I am, I'll try to hold you answerable.

Oedipus

O arrogance unashamed! Whose age do you 960
 Think you are insulting, mine or yours?
 The bloody deaths, the incest, the calamities
 You speak so glibly of: I suffered them,

By fate, against my will! It was God's pleasure,
 And perhaps our race had angered him long ago 965
 In me myself you could not find such evil
 As would have made me sin against my own
 And tell me this: if there were prophecies
 Repeated by the oracles of the gods,
 That father's death should come through his own son, 970
 How could you justly blame it upon me?
 On me, who was yet unborn, yet unconceived,
 Not yet existent for my father and mother?
 If then I came into the world—as I did come—
 In wretchedness, and met my father in fight, 975
 And knocked him down, not knowing that I killed him
 Nor whom I killed—again, how could you find
 Guilt in that unmeditated act?
 As for my mother—damn you, you have no shame,
 Though you are her own brother, in forcing me 980
 To speak of that unspeakable marriage;
 But I shall speak, I'll not be silent now
 After you've let your foul talk go so far!
 Yes, she gave me birth—incredible fate!—
 But neither of us knew the truth; and she
 Bore my children also—and then her shame.
 But one thing I do know: you are content 985
 To slander her as well as me for that;
 While I would not have married her willingly
 Nor willingly would I ever speak of it.
 No: I shall not be judged an evil man,
 Neither in that marriage nor in that death
 Which you forever charge me with so bitterly.— 990
 Just answer me one thing:
 If someone tried to kill you here and now,
 You righteous gentleman, what would you do,
 Inquire first if the stranger was your father?
 Or would you not first try to defend yourself?

I think that since you like to be alive 995
 You'd treat him as the threat required; not
 Look around for assurance that you were right.
 Well, that was the sort of danger I was in,
 Forced into it by the gods My father's soul,
 Were it on earth, I know would bear me out.

You, however, being a knave—and since you 1000
 Think it fair to say anything you choose,
 And speak of what should not be spoken of—
 Accuse me of all this before these people
 You also think it clever to flatter Theseus,
 And Athens—her exemplary government;

But in your flattery you have forgotten this: 1005
 If any country comprehends the honors
 Due to the gods, this country knows them best;
 Yet you would steal me from Athens in my age
 And in my time of prayer; indeed, you seized me,
 And you have taken and carried off my daughters.

Now for that profanation I make my prayer, 1010
 Calling on the divinities of the grove
 That they shall give me aid and fight for me;
 So you may know what men defend this town.

Chorus

My lord, our friend is worthy; he has had
 Disastrous fortune; yet he deserves our comfort. 1015

Theseus

Enough of speeches. While the perpetrators
 Flee, we who were injured loiter here.

Creon

What will you have me do?—since I am worthless.

Theseus

You lead us on the way. You can be my escort.
 If you are holding the children in this neighborhood 1020
 You yourself will uncover them to me.

If your retainers have taken them in flight,
 The chase is not ours; others are after them.
 And they will never have cause to thank their gods
 For getting free out of this country.
 All right. Move on And remember that the captor 1025
 Is now the captive; the hunter is in the snare.
 What was won by stealth will not be kept.
 In this you'll not have others to assist you;
 And I know well you had them, for you'd never
 Dare to go so far in your insolence 1030
 Were you without sufficient accomplices.
 You must have had a reason for your confidence,
 And I must reckon with it. The whole city
 Must not seem overpowered by one man.
 Do you understand at all? Or do you think
 That what I say is still without importance? 1035

Creon

To what you say I make no objection here.
 At home we, too, shall determine what to do.

Theseus

If you must threaten, do so on the way.
 Oedipus, you stay here, and rest assured
 That unless I perish first I'll not draw breath 1040
 Until I put your children in your hands.

Oedipus

Bless you for your noble heart, Theseus!
 And good luck to you in what you do for us!

*(Two Soldiers take Creon by the arms and march him out,
 right, followed by Theseus and the rest of his men.
 The Chorus follows a short way and stands
 gazing after them.)*

CHORAL POEM

Chorus

Ah, God, to be where the pillagers make stand!
 To hear the shout and brazen sound of war! 1045

Or maybe on Apollo's sacred strand,
 Or by that torchlit Eleusinian shore
 Where pilgrims come, whose lips the golden key
 1050 Of sweet-voiced ministers has rendered still,
 To cherish there with grave Persephone
 Consummate rest from death and mortal ill;
 For even to those shades the warrior king
 1055 Will press the fighting on—until he take
 The virgin sisters from the foemen's ring,
 Within his country, for his country's sake!
 It may be they will get beyond the plain
 And reach the snowy mountain's western side,
 1060 If their light chariots have the racing rein,
 If they have ponies, and if they can ride;
 Yet they'll be taken: for the god they fear
 Fights for our land, and Theseus sends forth
 1065 His breakneck cavalry with all its gear
 Flashing like mountain lightning to the north.
 These are the riders of Athens, conquered never;
 They honor her whose glory all men know,
 And honor the god of the sea, who loves forever
 1070 The feminine earth that bore him long ago.

*(A shift of grouping, and the four following stanzas
 taken each by a separate voice)*

Chorus

Has the fight begun? May it begin!
 The presentiment enchants my mind
 1075 That they shall soon give in!
 And free the daughters of the blind
 From hurt by their own kind!
*For God will see some noble thing
 Before this day is over.*
 Forevisioning the fight, and proud,
 1080 Would I could be a soaring dove

And circle the tall cloud;
So might I gaze down from above
On the mêlée I love.

*For God will see some noble thing
Before this day is over.*

All highest of immortals! Hail,
Great Zeus who see all things below!
Let not our troopers fail;
But give them luck to snare and throw
And bring the quarry low!

1085

*And you shall see some noble thing
Before this day is over.*

Stern Pallas, hear us! Apollo, hear!
Hunter and sister who give chase
To the swift and dappled deer:
Be our protectors! Lend your grace
To our land and our race!

1090

*And you shall see some noble thing
Before this day is over.*

*(There is a long pause, and then the Chorus turns
to Oedipus in joy.)*

SCENE 5

Chorus

O wanderer! You will not say I lied;
I who kept lookout for you!
I see them now—the two girls—here they come
With our armed men around them!

Oedipus

Ah, where? Do you really mean it?

*(Theseus comes in leading by the hand Antigone and
Ismene, followed by Soldiers.)*

Antigone

Father, father!

I wish some god would give you eyes to see
The noble prince who brings us back to you!

1100

Oedipus

Ah, child! You are really here?

Antigone

Yes, for the strength

Of Theseus and his kind followers saved us.

Oedipus

Come to your father, child, and let me touch you
Whom I had thought never to touch again!

1105

Antigone

It shall be as you ask; I wish it as much as you.

Oedipus

Where are you?

Antigone

We are coming to you together.

Oedipus

My sweet children!

Antigone

To our father, sweet indeed

Oedipus

My staff and my support!

Antigone

And partners in sorrow.

Oedipus

I have what is dearest to me in the world
To die, now, would not be so terrible,
Since you are near me.

1110

Press close to me, child,

Be rooted in your father's arms; rest now
From the cruel separation, the going and coming;
And tell me the story as briefly as you can:
A little talk is enough for girls so tired.

1115

Antigone

Theseus saved us. he is the one to tell you;
Neither you nor I had much to do with it!

Oedipus

Dear friend: don't be offended if I continue
To talk to these two children overlong; 1120
I had scarce thought they would be seen again!
Be sure I understand that you alone
Made this joy possible for me
You are the one that saved them, no one else.
And may the gods give you such destiny
As I desire for you: and for your country. 1125
For I have found you truly reverent,
Decent, and straight in speech: you only
Of all mankind
I know it, and I thank you with these words.
All that I have I owe to your courtesy;—
Now give me your right hand, my lord, 1130
And if it be permitted, let me kiss you . . .
What am I saying? How can a wretch like me
Desire to touch a man who has no stain
Of evil in him? No, no; I will not do it,
And neither shall you touch me. The only ones 1135
Fit to be fellow suffers of mine
Are those with such experience as I have.
Receive my salutation where you are.
And for the rest, be kindly to me still
As you have been up to now.

Theseus

That you should talk a long time to your children
In joy at seeing them—why, that's no wonder! 1140
Or that you should address them before me—
There's no offense in that. It is not in words
That I should wish my life to be distinguished,
But rather in things done.

Have I not shown that? I was not a liar
 In what I swore I'd do for you, old man
 I am here, and I have brought them back
 Alive and safe, for all they were threatened with.
 As to how I found them, how I took them, why
 Brag of it? You will surely learn from them

1145

However, there is a matter that just now
 Came to my attention on my way here—
 A trivial thing to speak of, and yet puzzling;
 I want your opinion on it.
 It is best for a man not to neglect such things.

1150

Oedipus

What is it, son of Aegeus? Tell me,
 So I may know on what you desire counsel.

1155

Theseus

They say some man is here who claims to be
 A relative of yours, though not of Thebes,
 For some reason he has thrown himself in prayer
 Before Poseidon's altar, where I was making
 Sacrifice before I came.

Oedipus

What is his country? What is he praying for?

1160

Theseus

All I know is this: he asks, they tell me,
 A brief interview with you, and nothing more.

Oedipus

What about, I wonder?
 It can't be a slight matter, if he is praying.

Theseus

They say he only asks to speak to you
 And then to depart safely by the same road.

1165

Oedipus

Who could it be who would come here to pray?

Theseus

Think: have you any relative in Argos
Who might desire this favor of you?

Oedipus

Dear friend!

Say no more!

Theseus

What is the matter with you?

Oedipus

No more!

Theseus

But. what is the matter? Tell me.

1170

Oedipus

When I heard "Argos" I knew the petitioner.

Theseus

And who is he whom I must prepare to dislike?

Oedipus

A son of mine, my lord, and a hated one
Nothing could be more painful than to listen to him.

Theseus

But why? Is it not possible to listen
Without doing anything you need not do?
Why should it annoy you so to hear him?

1175

Oedipus

My lord, even his voice is hateful to me.
Don't beat me down; don't make me yield in this!

Theseus

But now consider if you are not obliged
To do so by his supplication here:
Perhaps you have a duty to the god.

1180

Antigone

Father: listen to me, even if I am young.
Allow this man to satisfy his conscience
And give the gods whatever he thinks their due.
And let our brother come here, for my sake.

Don't be afraid: he will not throw you off 1185
 In your resolve, nor speak offensively.
 What is the harm in hearing what he says?
 If he has ill intentions, he'll betray them.
 You sired him; even had he wronged you, father,
 And wronged you impiously, still you could not 1190
 Rightfully wrong him in return!
 Do let him come!

Other men have bad sons,
 And other men are swift to anger, yet
 They will accept advice, they will be swayed
 By their friends' pleading, even against their nature.
 Reflect, not on the present, but on the past, 1195
 Think of your mother's and your father's fate
 And what you suffered through them! If you do,
 I think you'll see how terrible an end
 Terrible wrath may have.
 You have, I think, a permanent reminder
 In your lost, irrecoverable eyes. . . . 1200
 Ah, yield to us! If our request is just,
 We need not, surely, be importunate;
 And you, to whom I have not yet been hard,
 Should not be obdurate with me!

Oedipus

Child, your talk wins you a pleasure
 That will be pain for me. If you have set 1205
 Your heart on it, so be it.
 Only, Theseus: if he is to come here,
 Let no one have power over my life!

Theseus

That is the sort of thing I need hear only
 Once, not twice, old man. I do not boast,
 But you should know your life is safe while mine is. 1210

(Theseus goes out, left, with his Soldiers, leaving two on guard. The Chorus turns to address the audience.)

CHORAL POEM

Chorus

Though he has watched a decent age pass by,
 A man will sometimes still desire the world.
 I swear I see no wisdom in that man.
 The endless hours pile up a drift of pain
 More unrelieved each day; and as for pleasure, 1215
 When he is sunken in excessive age,
 You will not see his pleasure anywhere
 The last attendant is the same for all,
 Old men and young alike, as in its season 1220
 Man's heritage of underworld appears:
 There being then no epithalamion,
 No music and no dance. Death is the finish.
 Not to be born surpasses thought and speech.
 The second best is to have seen the light 1225
 And then to go back quickly whence we came.
 The feathery follies of his youth once over, 1230
 What trouble is beyond the range of man?
 What heavy burden will he not endure?
 Jealousy, faction, quarreling, and battle—
 The bloodiness of war, the grief of war.
 And in the end he comes to strengthless age, 1235
 Abhorred by all men, without company,
 Unfriended in that uttermost twilight
 Where he must live with every bitter thing
 This is the truth, not for me only,
 But for this blind and ruined man.
 Think of some shore in the north the 1240
 Concussive waves make stream
 This way and that in the gales of winter:
 It is like that with him:
 The wild wrack breaking over him
 From head to foot, and coming on forever;
 Now from the plunging down of the sun, 1245

Now from the sunrise quarter,
Now from where the noonday gleams,
Now from the night and the north.

(*Antigone and Ismene have been looking off-stage, left.*
Antigone turns.)

SCENE 6

Antigone

I think I see the stranger near us now,
And no men with him, father; but his eyes
Swollen with weeping as he comes. 1250

(*Polyneices enters, left.*)

Oedipus

Who comes?

Antigone

The one whom we have had so long in mind;
It is he who stands here; it is Polyneices.

Polyneices

Ah, now what shall I do? Sisters, shall I
Weep for my misfortunes or for those 1255
I see in the old man, my father,
Whom I have found here in an alien land,
With you two girls, an outcast for so long,
And with such garments! The abominable
Filth grown old with him, rotting his sides!
And on his sightless face the ragged hair 1260
Streams in the wind. There's the same quality
In the food he carries for his thin old belly.
All this I learn too late.
And I swear now that I have been villainous 1265
In not supporting you! You need not wait
To hear it said by others!

Only, think:

Compassion limits even the power of God;
So may there be a limit for you, father!

For all that has gone wrong may still be healed,
And surely the worst is over! 1270

Why are you silent?
Speak to me, father! Don't turn away from me!
Will you not answer me at all? Will you
Send me away without a word?

Not even

Tell me why you are enraged against me?
Daughters of Oedipus, my own sisters, 1275
Try to move your so implacable father;
Do not let him reject me in such contempt!
Make him reply!

I am here on pilgrimage. . . .

Antigone

Poor brother: you yourself must tell him why. 1280
As men speak on they may sometimes give pleasure,
Sometimes annoy, or sometimes touch the heart;
And so somehow provide the mute with voices.

Polyneices

I will speak out then; your advice is fair.
First, however, I must claim the help 1285
Of that same god, Poseidon, from whose altars
The governor of this land has lifted me
And sent me here, giving me leave to speak
And to await response, and a safe passage.
These are the favors I desire from you,
Stranger, and from my sisters and my father. 1290
And now, father, I will tell you why I came.
I am a fugitive, driven from my country,
Because I thought fit, as the eldest born,
To take my seat upon your sovereign throne.
For that, Eteocles, the younger of us, 1295
Banished me—but not by a decision
In argument or ability or arms;
Merely because he won the city over.

Of this I believe the Furies that pursue you
Were indeed the cause: and so I hear 1300
From clairvoyants whom I afterwards consulted. . . .

Then, when I went into the Dorian land,
I took Adrastus as my father-in-law,
And bound to me by oath whatever men
Were known as leaders or as fighters there;
My purpose being to form an expedition
Of seven troops of spearmen against Thebes — 1305
With which enlistment may I die for justice
Or else expel the men who exiled me!

So it is. Then why should I come here now?
Father, my prayers must be made to you!
Mine and those of all who fight with me! 1310
Their seven columns under seven captains
Even now complete the encirclement of Thebes:
Men like Amphiaraus, the hard spear thrower,
Expert in spears and in the ways of eagles;

Second is Tydeus, the Aetolian, 1315
Son of Oeneus; third is Eteoclus,
Born in Argos; fourth is Hippomedon
(His father, Talaus, sent him); Capaneus,
The fifth, has sworn he'll raze the town of Thebes
With fire-brands; and sixth is Parthenopaeus, 1320
An Arcadian who roused himself to war—
Son of that virgin famous in the old time
Who long years afterward conceived and bore him—
Parthenopaeus, Atalanta's son

And it is I, your son—or if I am not
Truly your son, since evil fathered me,
At least I am called your son—it is I who lead
The fearless troops of Argos against Thebes. 1325

Now in the name of these two children, father,
And for your own soul's sake, we all implore
And beg you to give up your heavy wrath

Against me! I go forth to punish him,
The brother who robbed me of my fatherland! 1330
If we can put any trust in oracles,
They say that those you bless shall come to power.

Now by the gods and fountains of our people,
I pray you, listen and comply! Are we not beggars
Both of us, and exiles, you and I? 1335
We live by paying court to other men;
The same fate follows us.
But as for him—how insupportable!—
He lords it in our house, luxuriates there,
Laughs at us both!

If you will stand by me in my resolve,
I'll waste no time or trouble whipping him; 1340
And then I'll re-establish you at home,
And settle there myself, and throw him out.
If your will is the same as mine, it's possible
To promise this. If not, I can't be saved. 1345

Chorus

For the sake of the one who sent him, Oedipus,
Speak to this man before you send him back.

Oedipus

Yes, gentlemen: but were it not Theseus,
The sovereign of your land, who sent him here, 1350
Thinking it right that he should have an answer,
You never would have heard a sound from me.

Well: he has asked, and he shall hear from me
A kind of answer that will not overjoy him.
You scoundrel!

When it was you who held
Throne and authority—as your brother now 1355
Holds them in Thebes—you drove me into exile:
Me, your own father: made me a homeless man,
Insuring me these rags you blubber over

When you behold them now—now that you, too,
Have fallen on evil days and are in exile.

Weeping is no good now. However long
My life may last, I have to see it through;
But I regard you as a murderer!

For you reduced me to this misery,
You made me an alien. Because of you
I have begged my daily bread from other men.
If I had not these children to sustain me,
I might have lived or died for all your interest.
But they have saved me, they are my support,
And are not girls, but men, in faithfulness.
As for you two, you are no sons of mine!

And so it is that there are eyes that watch you
Even now; though not as they shall watch
If those troops are in fact marching on Thebes.
You cannot take that city. You'll go down
All bloody, and your brother, too.

For I

Have placed that curse upon you before this,
And now I invoke that curse to fight for me,
That you may see a reason to respect
Your parents, though your birth was as it was;
And though I am blind, not to dishonor me.
These girls did not.

And so your supplication and your throne
Are overmastered surely,—if accepted
Justice still has place in the laws of God.
Now go! For I abominate and disown you!
You utter scoundrel! Go with the malediction
I here pronounce for you: that you shall never
Master your native land by force of arms,
Nor ever see your home again in Argos,
The land below the hills; but you shall die
By your own brother's hand, and you shall kill

The brother who banished you. For this I pray.
 And I cry out to the hated underworld 1390
 That it may take you home, cry out to those
 Powers indwelling here; and to that Power
 Of furious War that filled your hearts with hate!
 Now you have heard me. Go: tell it to Thebes,
 Tell all the Thebans; tell your faithful fighting
 Friends what sort of honors 1395
 Oedipus has divided among his sons!

Chorus

Polyneices, your coming here has given me
 No joy at all. Now go away at once.

Polyneices

Ah, what a journey! What a failure!
 My poor companions! See the finish now 1400
 Of all we marched from Argos for! See me . . .
 For I can neither speak of this to anyone
 Among my friends, nor lead them back again;
 I must go silently to meet this doom.
 O sisters—daughters of his, sisters of mine! 1405
 You heard the hard curse of our father:
 For God's sweet sake, if father's curse comes true,
 And if you find some way to return home,
 Do not, at least, dishonor me in death!
 But give me a grave and what will quiet me. 1410
 Then you shall have, besides the praise he now
 Gives you for serving him, an equal praise
 For offices you shall have paid my ghost.

Antigone

Polyneices, I beseech you, listen to me!

Polyneices

Dearest—what is it? Tell me, Antigone. 1415

Antigone

Withdraw your troops to Argos as soon as you can.
Do not go to your own death and your city's!

Polyneices

But that is impossible. How could I command
That army, even backward, once I faltered?

Antigone

Now why, boy, must your anger rise again? 1420
What is the good of laying waste your homeland?

Polyneices

It is shameful to run; and it is also shameful
To be a laughing-stock to a younger brother.

Antigone

But see how you fulfill his prophecies!
Did he not cry that you should kill each other? 1425

Polyneices

He wishes that. But I cannot give way

Antigone

Ah, I am desolate! But who will dare
Go with you, after hearing the prophecies?

Polyneices

I'll not report this trifle. A good commander
Tells what is encouraging, not what is not. 1430

Antigone

Then you have made up your mind to this, my brother?

Polyneices

Yes. And do not try to hold me back.
The dark road is before me; I must take it,
Doomed by my father and his avenging Furies.
God bless you if you do what I have asked: 1435
It is only in death that you can help me now.
Now let me go. Good-bye! You will not ever
Look in my eyes again.

Antigone

You break my heart!

Polyneices

Do not grieve for me.

Antigone

Who would not grieve for you,

Sweet brother! You go with open eyes to death!

1440

Polyneices

Death, if that must be.

Antigone

No! Do as I ask!

Polyneices

You ask the impossible.

Antigone

Then I am lost,

If I must be deprived of you!

Polyneices

All that

Rests with the powers that are over us,—

Whether it must be so or otherwise.

You two—I pray no evil comes to you,

1445

For all men know you merit no more pain.

*(Polyneices goes out, left. There is a dead silence;
then the Chorus meditates)*

CHORAL POEM AND DIALOGUE

Chorus

So in this new event we see

New forms of terror working through the blind,

Or else inscrutable destiny.

1450

I am not one to say "This is in vain"

Of anything allotted to mankind.

Though some must fall, or fall to rise again,

Time watches all things steadily—

1455

(A terrific peal of thunder.)

Ah, Zeus! Heaven's height has cracked!

Oedipus

Antigone

Oedipus

(Thunder and lightning.)

Chorus

There the lightning flames again!

What heavenly marvel is it bringing 'round?

I fear it, for it never comes in vain,

But for man's luck or his despair. . . . 1470

(Another terrific peal.)

Ah, Zeus! Majestic heaven!

Oedipus

My children, the appointed end has come;
I can no longer turn away from it.

Antigone

How do you know? What is the sign that tells you?

Oedipus

I know it clearly now. Let someone quickly
Send for the king and bring him here to me!

(Thunder and lightning.)

Chorus

Hear the wild thunder fall!
Towering Nature is transfixed!

Be merciful, great spirit, if you run 1480
 This sword of darkness through our mother land;
 Come not for our confusion,
 And deal no blows to me,
 Though your tireless Furies stand
 By him whom I have looked upon
 Great Zeus, I make my prayer to thee! 1485

Oedipus

Is the king near by? Will he come in time
 To find me still alive, my mind still clear?

Antigone

Tell me what it is you have in mind!

Oedipus

To give him now, in return for his great kindness,
 The blessing that I promised I would give. 1490
 (*Thunder.*)

Chorus

O noble son, return!
 No matter if you still descend
 In the deep fastness of the sea god's grove,
 To make pure offering at his altar fire:
 Come back quickly, for God's love! 1495
 Receive from this strange man
 Whatever may be his heart's desire
 That you and I and Athens are worthy of.
 My lord, come quickly as you can!

*(The thunder continues, until it stops abruptly with
 the entrance of Theseus, left.)*

SCENE 7

Theseus

Now why do you all together 1500
 Set up this shout once more?
 I see it comes from you, as from our friend.
 Is it a lightning bolt from God? a squall

Of rattling hail? Those are familiar things
When such a tempest rages over heaven.

Oedipus

My lord, I longed for you to come! This is
God's work, your lucky coming. 1505

Theseus

Now, what new
Circumstance has arisen, son of Laius?

Oedipus

My life sinks in the scale: I would not die
Without fulfilling what I promised Athens.

Theseus

What proof have you that your hour has come? 1510

Oedipus

The great, incessant thunder and continuous
Flashes of lightning from the hand of God. 1515

Theseus

I believe you. I have seen you prophesy
Many things, none falsely. What must be done?

Oedipus

I shall disclose to you, O son of Aegeus,
What is appointed for you and for your city:
A thing that age will never wear away.
Presently now, without a soul to guide me, 1520
I'll lead you to the place where I must die;
But you must never tell it to any man,
Not even the neighborhood in which it lies.
If you obey, this will count more for you
Than many shields and many neighbors' spears. 1525
These things are mysteries, not to be explained;
But you will understand when you come there
Alone. Alone, because I cannot disclose it
To any of your men or to my children,
Much as I love and cherish them. But you

Keep it secret always, and when you come 1530
 To the end of life, then you must hand it on
 To your most cherished son, and he in turn
 Must teach it to his heir, and so forever.
 That way you shall forever hold this city
 Safe from the men of Thebes, the dragon's sons.

For every nation that lives peaceably,
 There will be many others to grow hard
 And push their arrogance to extremes: the gods 1535
 Attend to these things slowly But they attend
 To those who put off God and turn to madness!
 You have no mind for that, child of Aegeus;
 Indeed, you know already all that I teach.

Let us proceed then to that place 1540
 And hesitate no longer; I am driven
 By an insistent voice that comes from God.
 Children, follow me this way. see, now,
 I have become your guide, as you were mine!
 Come: do not touch me: let me alone discover
 The holy and funereal ground where I 1545
 Must take this fated earth to be my shroud
 This way, O come! The angel of the dead,
 Hermes, and veiled Persephone lead me on!

(He leads them, firmly and slowly, to the left)

O sunlight of no light! Once you were mine!
 This is the last my flesh will feel of you; 1550
 For now I go to shade my ending day
 In the dark underworld. Most cherished friend!
 I pray that you and this your land and all
 Your people may be blessed: remember me,
 Be mindful of my death, and be
 Fortunate in all the time to come! 1555

*(Oedipus goes out, followed by his children and by Theseus
 with his Soldiers. The Chorus lifts its arms to pray.)*

« OEDIPUS AT COLONUS »

CHORAL POEM

Chorus

If I may dare to adore that Lady
The living never see,
And pray to the master of spirits plunged in night,
Who of vast Hell has sovereignty;
Let not our friend go down in grief and weariness 1560
To that all-shrouding cold,
The dead men's plain, the house that has no light.
Because his sufferings were great, unmerited and untold, 1565
Let some just god relieve him from distress!

O powers under the earth, and tameless
Beast in the passage way, 1570
Rumbler prone at the gate of the strange hosts,
Their guard forever, the legends say:
I pray you, even Death, offspring of Earth and Hell,
To let the descent be clear 1575
As Oedipus goes down among the ghosts
On those dim fields of underground that all men living fear.
Eternal sleep, let Oedipus sleep well!

(A long pause. A Messenger comes in, left.)

SCENE 8

Messenger

Citizens, the briefest way to tell you
Would be to say that Oedipus is no more; 1580
But what has happened cannot be told so simply—
It was no simple thing.

Chorus

He is gone, poor man?

Messenger

You may be sure that he has left this world.

Chorus

By God's mercy, was his death a painless one? 1585

Messenger

That is the thing that seems so marvelous

You know, for you were witnesses, how he
Left this place with no friend leading him,
Acting, himself, as guide for all of us.

Well, when he came to the steep place in the road, 1590
The embankment there, secured with steps of brass,
He stopped in one of the many branching paths.

This was not far from the stone bowl that marks
Theseus' and Pirithous' covenant.

Half-way between that place of stone
With its hollow pear tree, and the marble tomb, 1595
He sat down and undid his filthy garments;
Then he called his daughters and commanded
That they should bring him water from a fountain
For bathing and libation to the dead

From there they could see the hill of Demeter, 1600
Freshener of all things: so they ascended it
And soon came back with water for their father;
Then helped him properly to bathe and dress.

When everything was finished to his pleasure,
And no command of his remained undone, 1605
Then the earth groaned with thunder from the god below;
And as they heard the sound, the girls shuddered,
And dropped to their father's knees, and began wailing,
Beating their breasts and weeping as if heartbroken.

And hearing them cry out so bitterly, 1610
He put his arms around them, and said to them:

"Children, this day your father is gone from you.
All that was mine is gone. You shall no longer
Bear the burden of taking care of me—
I know it was hard, my children.—And yet one word 1615
Makes all those difficulties disappear:
That word is love. You never shall have more

From any man than you have had from me.
And now you must spend the rest of life without me."

That was the way of it. They clung together
And wept, all three. But when they finally stopped,
And no more sobs were heard, then there was
Silence, and in the silence suddenly

A voice cried out to him—of such a kind
It made our hair stand up in panic fear:

Again and again the call came from the god:
"Oedipus! Oedipus! Why are we waiting?
You delay too long; you delay too long to go!"

Then, knowing himself summoned by the spirit,
He asked that the lord Theseus come to him;
And when he had come, said: "O beloved one,

Give your right hand now as a binding pledge
To my two daughters; children, give him your hands.
Promise that you will never willingly
Betray them, but will carry out in kindness
Whatever is best for them in the days to come."

And Theseus swore to do it for his friend,
With such restraint as fits a noble king
And when he had done so, Oedipus at once
Laid his blind hands upon his daughters, saying:
"Children, you must show your nobility,
And have the courage now to leave this spot.
You must not wish to see what is forbidden,
Or hear what may not afterward be told.
But go—go quickly. Only the lord Theseus
May stay to see the thing that now begins."

This much every one of us heard him say,
And then we came away with the sobbing girls.
But after a little while as we withdrew
We turned around—and nowhere saw that man,
But only the king, his hands before his face,

Shading his eyes as if from something awful,
 Fearful and unendurable to see.
 Then very quickly we saw him do reverence
 To Earth and to the powers of the air,
 With one address to both.

But in what manner

1655

Oedipus perished, no one of mortal men
 Could tell but Theseus. It was not lightning,
 Bearing its fire from God, that took him off;
 No hurricane was blowing.

1660

But some attendant from the train of Heaven
 Came for him; or else the underworld
 Opened in love the unlit door of earth.
 For he was taken without lamentation,
 Illness or suffering, indeed his end
 Was wonderful if mortal's ever was.

1665

Should someone think I speak intemperately,
 I make no apology to him who thinks so.

Chorus

But where are his children and the others with them?

Messenger

They are not far away; the sound of weeping
 Should tell you now that they are coming here.

(Antigone and Ismene enter together.)

CHORAL DIALOGUE

Antigone

Now we may weep, indeed.
 Now, if ever, we may cry
 In bitter grief against our fate,
 Our heritage still unappeased.
 In other days we stood up under it,
 Endured it for his sake,
 The unrelenting horror. Now the finish
 Comes, and we know only

1670

1675

In all that we have seen and done
Bewildering mystery.

Chorus

What happened?

Antigone

We can only guess, my friends.

Chorus

He has gone?

Antigone

He has; as one could wish him to.

Why not? It was not war
Nor the deep sea that overtook him, 1680
But something invisible and strange
Caught him up—or down—
Into a space unseen.
But we are lost. A deathly
Night is ahead of us.
For how, in some far country wandering, 1685
Or on the lifting seas,
Shall we eke out our lives?

Ismene

I cannot guess. But as for me
I wish that charnel Hell would take me 1690
In one death with our father.
This is such desolation
I cannot go on living.

Chorus

Most admirable sisters:
Whatever God has brought about
Is to be borne with courage.
You must not feed the flames of grief. 1695
No blame can come to you.

Antigone

One may long for the past
Though at the time indeed it seemed

Nothing but wretchedness and evil.
Life was not sweet, yet I found it so
When I could put my arms around my father
O father! O my dear!
Now you are shrouded in eternal darkness,
Even in that absence
You shall not lack our love,
Mine and my sister's love.

1700

Chorus

He lived his life.

Antigone

He did as he had wished!

Chorus

What do you mean?

Antigone

In this land among strangers

1705

He died where he chose to die
He has his eternal bed well shaded,
And in his death is not unmourned.

My eyes are blind with tears

From crying for you, father.

1710

The terror and the loss

Cannot be quieted.

I know you wished to die in a strange country,

Yet your death was so lonely!

Why could I not be with you?

Ismene

O pity! What is left for me?

1715

What destiny awaits us both

Now we have lost our father?

Chorus

Dear children, remember

1720

That his last hour was free and blessed.

So make an end of grieving!

Is anyone in all the world
Safe from unhappiness?

Antigone

Let us run back there!

Ismene

Why, what shall we do?

Antigone

I am carried away with longing—

Ismene

For what,—tell me!

1725

Antigone

To see the resting place in the earth—

Ismene

Of whom?

Antigone

Oh, father's! O dear God, I am so unhappy!

Ismene

But that is not permitted. Do you not see?

Antigone

Do not rebuke me!

Ismene

—And remember, too—

1730

Antigone

Oh, what?

Ismene

He had no tomb, there was no one near!

Antigone

Take me there and you can kill me, too!

Ismene

Ah! I am truly lost!

Helpless and so forsaken!

1735

Where shall I go and how shall I live?

Chorus

Don't be afraid, now.

Antigone

Yes, but where is a refuge?

Chorus

A refuge has been found—

Antigone

Where do you mean?

Chorus

A place where you will be unharmed!

Antigone

No . . .

1740

Chorus

What are you thinking?

Antigone

I think there is no way

For me to get home again.

Chorus

Do not go home!

Antigone

My home is in trouble.

Chorus

So it has been before.

Antigone

There was no help for it then: but now it is worse.

1745

Chorus

A wide and desolate world it is for you.

Antigone

Great God! What way is there?

Do the powers that rule our lives

Still press me on to hope at all?

1750

(*Theseus comes in, with attendants*)

Theseus

Mourn no more, children. Those to whom

The night of earth gives benediction

Should not be mourned. Retribution comes.

Antigone

Theseus: we fall on our knees to you!

Theseus

What is it that you desire, children?

1755

Antigone

We wish to see the place ourselves
In which our father rests.

Theseus

No, no.

It is not permissible to go there.

Antigone

My lord and ruler of Athens, why?

Theseus

Because your father told me, children,
That no one should go near the spot,
No mortal man should tell of it,
Since it is holy, and is his.
And if I kept this pledge, he said,
I should preserve my land from its enemies.
I swore I would, and the god heard me:
The oathkeeper who keeps track of all.

1760

1765

Antigone

If this was our father's cherished wish,
We must be satisfied.
Send us back, then, to ancient Thebes,
And we may stop the bloody war
From coming between our brothers!

1770

Theseus

I will do that, and whatever else
I am able to do for your happiness,
For his sake who has gone just now
Beneath the earth. I must not fail.

1775

Chorus

Now let the weeping cease;
Let no one mourn again.
These things are in the hands of God:

ANTIGONE

Translated by

ELIZABETH WYCKOFF



CHARACTERS

Antigone

Ismene

Chorus of Theban Elders

Creon

A Guard

Haemon

Teiresias

A Messenger

Eurydice

ANTIGONE

SCENE: *Thebes, before the royal palace. Antigone and Ismene emerge from its great central door.*

Antigone

My sister, my Ismene, do you know
of any suffering from our father sprung
that Zeus does not achieve for us survivors?
There's nothing grievous, nothing free from doom,
not shameful, not dishonored, I've not seen.
Your sufferings and mine.
And now, what of this edict which they say
the commander has proclaimed to the whole people?
Have you heard anything? Or don't you know
that the foes' trouble comes upon our friends?

10

Ismene

I've heard no word, Antigone, of our friends.
Not sweet nor bitter, since that single moment
when we two lost two brothers
who died on one day by a double blow.
And since the Argive army went away
this very night, I have no further news
of fortune or disaster for myself.

Antigone

I knew it well, and brought you from the house
for just this reason, that you alone may hear.

Ismene

What is it? Clearly some news has clouded you.

20

Antigone

It has indeed. Creon will give the one
of our two brothers honor in the tomb;
the other none.

socles, with just entreatment treated,
 law provides he has hidden under earth
 have full honor with the dead below.
 it Polyneices' corpse who died in pain,
 ay say he has proclaimed to the whole town
 t none may bury him and none bewail,
 leave him unwept, untombed, a rich sweet sight
 the hungry birds' beholding.

30

ch orders they say the worthy Creon gives
 you and me—yes, yes, I say to *me*—
 that he's coming to proclaim it clear
 those who know it not.

rther: he has the matter so at heart
 at anyone who dares attempt the act
 ill die by public stoning in the town.

there you have it and you soon will show
 you are noble, or fallen from your descent.

te

things have reached this stage, what can I do,
 or sister, that will help to make or mend?

40

gone

hink will you share my labor and my act.

ne

What will you risk? And where is your intent?

gone

Will you take up that corpse along with me?

ne

'o bury him you mean, when it's forbidden?

gone

My brother, and yours, though you may wish he were not.
 never shall be found to be his traitor.

hard of mind! When Creon spoke against it!

Antigone

It's not for him to keep me from my own.

Ismene

Alas. Remember, sister, how our father
perished abhorred, ill-famed. 50
Himself with his own hand, through his own curse
destroyed both eyes.
Remember next his mother and his wife
finishing life in the shame of the twisted strings.
And third two brothers on a single day,
poor creatures, murdering, a common doom
each with his arm accomplished on the other.
And now look at the two of us alone.
We'll perish terribly if we force law
and try to cross the royal vote and power. 60
We must remember that we two are women
so not to fight with men.
And that since we are subject to strong power
we must hear these orders, or any that may be worse.
So I shall ask of them beneath the earth
forgiveness, for in these things I am forced,
and shall obey the men in power. I know
that wild and futile action makes no sense.

Antigone

I wouldn't urge it. And if now you wished
to act, you wouldn't please me as a partner. 70
Be what you want to; but that man shall I
bury. For me, the doer, death is best.
Friend shall I lie with him, yes friend with friend,
when I have dared the crime of piety.
Longer the time in which to please the dead
than that for those up here.
There shall I lie forever. You may see fit
to keep from honor what the gods have honored.

Ismene

I shall do no dishonor. But to act
against the citizens. I cannot.

Antigone

That's your protection. Now I go, to pile
the burial-mound for him, my dearest brother.

80

Ismene

Oh my poor sister. How I fear for you!

Antigone

For me, don't borrow trouble. Clear your fate.

Ismene

At least give no one warning of this act;
you keep it hidden, and I'll do the same

Antigone

Dear God! Denounce me. I shall hate you more
if silent, not proclaiming this to all.

Ismene

You have a hot mind over chilly things.

Antigone

I know I please those whom I most should please.

Ismene

If but you can. You crave what can't be done.

90

Antigone

And so, when strength runs out, I shall give over.

Ismene

Wrong from the start, to chase what cannot be.

Antigone

If that's your saying, I shall hate you first,
and next the dead will hate you in all justice.
But let me and my own ill-counselling
suffer this terror. I shall suffer nothing
as great as dying with a lack of grace.

Ismene

Go, since you want to. But know this: you go
senseless indeed, but loved by those who love you.

*(Ismene returns to the palace; Antigone leaves by one of the side
entrances. The Chorus now enters from the other side.)*

Chorus

Sun's own radiance, fairest light ever shone on the gates of
Thebes,

100

then did you shine, O golden day's
eye, coming over Dirce's stream,
on the Man who had come from Argos with all his armor
running now in headlong fear as you shook his bridle free.

He was stirred by the dubious quarrel of Polyneices.

110

So, screaming shrill,
like an eagle over the land he flew,
covered with white-snow wing,
with many weapons,
with horse-hair crested helms.

He who had stood above our halls, gaping about our seven gates,
with that circle of thirsting spears

Gone, without our blood in his jaws,

120

before the torch took hold on our tower-crown.

Rattle of war at his back; hard the fight for the dragon's foe.

The boasts of a proud tongue are for Zeus to hate.

So seeing them streaming on

in insolent clangor of gold,

130

he struck with hurling fire him who rushed

for the high wall's top,

to cry conquest abroad.

Swinging, striking the earth he fell

fire in hand, who in mad attack,

had raged against us with blasts of hate.

He failed. He failed of his aim.

For the rest great Ares dealt his blows about,
first in the war-team.

140

The captains stationed at seven gates
fought with seven and left behind
their brazen arms as an offering
to Zeus who is turner of battle.

All but those wretches, sons of one man,
one mother's sons, who sent their spears
each against each and found the share
of a common death together.

Great-named Victory comes to us
answering Thebe's warrior-joy.

Let us forget the wars just done
and visit the shrines of the gods.

150

All, with night-long dance which Bacchus will lead,
who shakes Thebe's acres.

(Creon enters from the palace.)

Now here he comes, the king of the land,
Creon, Menoeceus' son,
newly named by the gods' new fate.
What plan that beats about his mind
has made him call this council-session,
sending his summons to all?

160

Creon

My friends, the very gods who shook the state
with mighty surge have set it straight again
So now I sent for you, chosen from all,
first that I knew you constant in respect
to Laius' royal power; and again
when Oedipus had set the state to rights,
and when he perished, you were faithful still
in mind to the descendants of the dead.
When they two perished by a double fate,
on one day struck and striking and defiled
each by his own hand, now it comes that I

170

hold all the power and the royal throne
through close connection with the perished men.
You cannot learn of any man the soul,
the mind, and the intent until he shows
his practise of the government and law.
For I believe that who controls the state
and does not hold to the best plans of all,
but locks his tongue up through some kind of fear,
that he is worst of all who are or were.
And he who counts another greater friend
than his own fatherland, I put him nowhere.
So I—may Zeus all-seeing always know it—
could not keep silent as disaster crept
upon the town, destroying hope of safety.
Nor could I count the enemy of the land
friend to myself, not I who know so well
that she it is who saves us, sailing straight,
and only so can we have friends at all.
With such good rules shall I enlarge our state.
And now I have proclaimed their brother-edict.
In the matter of the sons of Oedipus,
citizens, know: Eteocles who died,
defending this our town with champion spear,
is to be covered in the grave and granted
all holy rites we give the noble dead
But his brother Polyneices whom I name
the exile who came back and sought to burn
his fatherland, the gods who were his kin,
who tried to gorge on blood he shared, and lead
the rest of us as slaves—
it is announced that no one in this town
may give him burial or mourn for him.
Leave him unburied, leave his corpse disgraced,
a dinner for the birds and for the dogs.
Such is my mind. Never shall I, myself,
honor the wicked and reject the just.

180

190

200

The man who is well-minded to the state
from me in death and life shall have his honor

210

Chorus

This resolution, Creon, is your own,
in the matter of the traitor and the true
For you can make such rulings as you will
about the living and about the dead.

Creon

Now you be sentinels of the decree.

Chorus

Order some younger man to take this on.

Creon

Already there are watchers of the corpse.

Chorus

What other order would you give us, then?

Creon

Not to take sides with any who disobey.

Chorus

No fool is fool as far as loving death.

220

Creon

Death is the price But often we have known
men to be ruined by the hope of profit.

(Enter, from the side, a guard)

Guard

Lord, I can't claim that I am out of breath
from rushing here with light and hasty step,
for I had many haltings in my thought
making me double back upon my road.

My mind kept saying many things to me:

"Why go where you will surely pay the price?"

"Fool, are you halting? And if Creon learns
from someone else, how shall you not be hurt?"

230

Turning this over, on I dilly-dallied.

And so a short trip turns itself to long.
Finally, though, my coming here won out.
If what I say is nothing, still I'll say it.
For I come clutching to one single hope
that I can't suffer what is not my fate

Creon

What is it that brings on this gloom of yours?

Guard

I want to tell you first about myself.
I didn't do it, didn't see who did it.
It isn't right for me to get in trouble

240

Creon

Your aim is good. You fence the fact around.
It's clear you have some shocking news to tell

Guard

Terrible tidings make for long delays.

Creon

Speak out the story, and then get away

Guard

I'll tell you. Someone left the corpse just now,
burial all accomplished, thirsty dust
strewn on the flesh, the ritual complete.

Creon

What are you saying? What man has dared to do it?

Guard

I wouldn't know. There were no marks of picks,
no grubbed-out earth. The ground was dry and hard,
no trace of wheels. The doer left no sign.
When the first fellow on the day-shift showed us,
we all were sick with wonder
For he was hidden, not inside a tomb,
light dust upon him, enough to turn the curse,
no wild beast's track, nor track of any hound

250

having been near, nor was the body torn.
 We roared bad words about, guard against guard, 260
 and came to blows. No one was there to stop us.
 Each man had done it, nobody had done it
 so as to prove it on him—we couldn't tell.
 We were prepared to hold to red-hot iron,
 to walk through fire, to swear before the gods
 we hadn't done it, hadn't shared the plan,
 when it was plotted or when it was done.
 And last, when all our sleuthing came out nowhere,
 one fellow spoke, who made our heads to droop
 low toward the ground. We couldn't disagree. 270
 We couldn't see a chance of getting off.
 He said we had to tell you all about it.
 We couldn't hide the fact.
 So he won out. The lot chose poor old me
 to win the prize. So here I am unwilling,
 quite sure you people hardly want to see me.
 Nobody likes the bringer of bad news.

Chorus

Lord, while he spoke, my mind kept on debating.
 Isn't this action possibly a god's?

Creon

Stop now, before you fill me up with rage, 280
 or you'll prove yourself insane as well as old.
 Unbearable, your saying that the gods
 take any kindly forethought for this corpse.
 Would it be they had hidden him away,
 honoring his good service, his who came
 to burn their pillared temples and their wealth,
 even their land, and break apart their laws?
 Or have you seen them honor wicked men?
 It isn't so.
 No, from the first there were some men in town 290
 who took the edict hard, and growled against me,

who hid the fact that they were rearing back,
not rightly in the yoke, no way my friends.
These are the people—oh it's clear to me—
who have bribed these men and brought about the deed.
No current custom among men as bad
as silver currency. This destroys the state;
this drives men from their homes; this wicked teacher
drives solid citizens to acts of shame.

It shows men how to practise infamy
and know the deeds of all unholiness. 300

Every least hireling who helped in this
brought about then the sentence he shall have.

But further, as I still revere great Zeus,
understand this, I tell you under oath,
if you don't find the very man whose hands
buried the corpse, bring him for me to see,
not death alone shall be enough for you
till living, hanging, you make clear the crime.

For any future grabbings you'll have learned
where to get pay, and that it doesn't pay
to squeeze a profit out of every source. 310

For you'll have felt that more men come to doom
through dirty profits than are kept by them.

Guard

May I say something? Or just turn and go?

Creon

Aren't you aware your speech is most unwelcome?

Guard

Does it annoy your hearing or your mind?

Creon

Why are you out to allocate my pain?

Guard

The doer hurts your mind. I hurt your ears.

Creon

You are a quibbling rascal through and through.

320

Guard

But anyhow I never did the deed.

Creon

And you the man who sold your mind for money!

Guard

Oh!

How terrible to guess, and guess at lies!

Creon

Go pretty up your guesswork. If you don't
show me the doers you will have to say
that wicked payments work their own revenge.

Guard

Indeed, I pray he's found, but yes or no,
taken or not as luck may settle it,
you won't see me returning to this place.
Saved when I neither hoped nor thought to be,
I owe the gods a mighty debt of thanks.

330

(Creon enters the palace. The Guard leaves by the way he came.)

Chorus

Many the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man.
This thing crosses the sea in the winter's storm,
making his path through the roaring waves.
And she, the greatest of gods, the earth—
ageless she is, and unwearied—he wears her away
as the ploughs go up and down from year to year
and his mules turn up the soil.

340

Gay nations of birds he snares and leads,
wild beast tribes and the salty brood of the sea,
with the twisted mesh of his nets, this clever man.
He controls with craft the beasts of the open air,
walkers on hills The horse with his shaggy mane

350

he holds and harnesses, yoked about the neck,
and the strong bull of the mountain.

Language, and thought like the wind
and the feelings that make the town,
he has taught himself, and shelter against the cold,
refuge from rain. He can always help himself.
He faces no future helpless. There's only death
that he cannot find an escape from. He has contrived
refuge from illnesses once beyond all cure. 360

Clever beyond all dreams
the inventive craft that he has
which may drive him one time or another to well or ill.
When he honors the laws of the land and the gods' sworn right
high indeed is his city; but stateless the man 370
who dares to dwell with dishonor. Not by my fire,
never to share my thoughts, who does these things.

(The Guard enters with Antigone.)

My mind is split at this awful sight.
I know her. I cannot deny
Antigone is here.
Alas, the unhappy girl,
her unhappy father's child. 380
Oh what is the meaning of this?
It cannot be you that they bring
for breaking the royal law,
caught in open shame.

Guard

This is the woman who has done the deed.
We caught her at the burying. Where's the king?

(Creon enters.)

Chorus

Back from the house again just when he's needed.

Creon

What must I measure up to? What has happened?

Guard

Lord, one should never swear off anything.
 Afterthought makes the first resolve a liar.
 I could have vowed I wouldn't come back here
 after your threats, after the storm I faced.
 But joy that comes beyond the wildest hope
 is bigger than all other pleasure known.
 I'm here, though I swore not to be, and bring
 this girl. We caught her burying the dead.
 This time we didn't need to shake the lots;
 mine was the luck, all mine.
 So now, lord, take her, you, and question her
 and prove her as you will. But I am free.
 And I deserve full clearance on this charge.

390

400

Creon

Explain the circumstance of the arrest.

Guard

She was burying the man. You have it all.

Creon

Is this the truth? And do you grasp its meaning?

Guard

I saw her burying the very corpse
 you had forbidden. Is this adequate?

Creon

How was she caught and taken in the act?

Guard

It was like this: when we got back again
 struck with those dreadful threatenings of yours,
 we swept away the dust that hid the corpse.
 We stripped it back to slimy nakedness.
 And then we sat to windward on the hill
 so as to dodge the smell.
 We poked each other up with growling threats
 if anyone was careless of his work.

410

For some time this went on, till it was noon.
The sun was high and hot. Then from the earth
up rose a dusty whirlwind to the sky,
filling the plain, smearing the forest-leaves,
clogging the upper air. We shut our eyes,
sat and endured the plague the gods had sent. 420
So the storm left us after a long time.
We saw the girl. She cried the sharp and shrill
cry of a bitter bird which sees the nest
bare where the young birds lay.
So this same girl, seeing the body stripped,
cried with great groanings, cried a dreadful curse
upon the people who had done the deed.
Soon in her hands she brought the thirsty dust,
and holding high a pitcher of wrought bronze 430
she poured the three libations for the dead.
We saw this and surged down. We trapped her fast,
and she was calm. We taxed her with the deeds
both past and present. Nothing was denied.
And I was glad, and yet I took it hard.
One's own escape from trouble makes one glad;
but bringing friends to trouble is hard grief.
Still, I care less for all these second thoughts
than for the fact that I myself am safe. 440

Creon

You there, whose head is drooping to the ground,
do you admit this, or deny you did it?

Antigone

I say I did it and I don't deny it.

Creon (to the guard)

Take yourself off wherever you wish to go
free of a heavy charge.

Creon (to Antigone)

You—tell me not at length but in a word.
You knew the order not to do this thing?

Antigone

I knew, of course I knew. The word was plain.

Creon

And still you dared to overstep these laws?

Antigone

For me it was not Zeus who made that order.
Nor did that Justice who lives with the gods below
mark out such laws to hold among mankind.

450

Nor did I think your orders were so strong
that you, a mortal man, could over-run
the gods' unwritten and unfailing laws.
Not now, nor yesterday's, they always live,
and no one knows their origin in time.

So not through fear of any man's proud spirit
would I be likely to neglect these laws,
draw on myself the gods' sure punishment.
I knew that I must die; how could I not?
even without your warning. If I die
before my time, I say it is a gain.

460

Who lives in sorrows many as are mine
how shall he not be glad to gain his death?
And so, for me to meet this fate, no grief.
But if I left that corpse, my mother's son,
dead and unburied I'd have cause to grieve
as now I grieve not.

And if you think my acts are foolishness
the foolishness may be in a fool's eye.

470

Chorus

The girl is bitter. She's her father's child.
She cannot yield to trouble; nor could he.

Creon

These rigid spirits are the first to fall.
The strongest iron, hardened in the fire,
most often ends in scraps and shatterings.

Small curbs bring raging horses back to terms.
Slave to his neighbor, who can think of pride?
This girl was expert in her insolence
when she broke bounds beyond established law.
Once she had done it, insolence the second,
to boast her doing, and to laugh in it.
I am no man and she the man instead
if she can have this conquest without pain.
She is my sister's child, but were she child
of closer kin than any at my hearth,
she and her sister should not so escape
their death and doom. I charge Ismene too.
She shared the planning of this burial
Call her outside. I saw her in the house,
maddened, no longer mistress of herself.
The sly intent betrays itself sometimes
before the secret plotters work their wrong.
I hate it too when someone caught in crime
then wants to make it seem a lovely thing

480

490

Antigone

Do you want more than my arrest and death?

Creon

No more than that. For that is all I need.

Antigone

Why are you waiting? Nothing that you say
fits with my thought. I pray it never will.
Nor will you ever like to hear my words.
And yet what greater glory could I find
than giving my own brother funeral?
All these would say that they approved my act
did fear not mute them.

500

(A king is fortunate in many ways,
and most, that he can act and speak at will.)

Creon

None of these others see the case this way.

Antigone

They see, and do not say. You have them cowed.

Creon

And you are not ashamed to think alone?

510

Antigone

No, I am not ashamed. When was it shame
to serve the children of my mother's womb?

Creon

It was not your brother who died against him, then?

Antigone

Full brother, on both sides, my parents' child.

Creon

Your act of grace, in his regard, is crime.

Antigone

The corpse below would never say it was.

Creon

When you honor him and the criminal just alike?

Antigone

It was a brother, not a slave, who died.

Creon

Died to destroy this land the other guarded.

Antigone

Death yearns for equal law for all the dead.

Creon

Not that the good and bad draw equal shares.

520

Antigone

Who knows that this is holiness below?

Creon

Never the enemy, even in death, a friend.

Antigone

I cannot share in hatred, but in love.

Creon

Then go down there, if you must love, and love
the dead. No woman rules me while I live.

(Ismene is brought from the palace under guard.)

Chorus

Look there! Ismene is coming out.
She loves her sister and mourns,
with clouded brow and bloodied cheeks,
tears on her lovely face.

530

Creon

You, lurking like a viper in the house,
who sucked me dry. I looked the other way
while twin destruction planned against the throne.
Now tell me, do you say you shared this deed?
Or will you swear you didn't even know?

Ismene

I did the deed, if she agrees I did.
I am accessory and share the blame.

Antigone

Justice will not allow this. You did not
wish for a part, nor did I give you one.

Ismene

You are in trouble, and I'm not ashamed
to sail beside you into suffering.

540

Antigone

Death and the dead, they know whose act it was.
I cannot love a friend whose love is words.

Ismene

Sister, I pray, don't fence me out from honor,
from death with you, and honor done the dead.

Antigone

Don't die along with me, nor make your own
that which you did not do. My death's enough.

Ismene

When you are gone what life can be my friend?

Antigone

Love Creon. He's your kinsman and your care.

Ismene

Why hurt me, when it does yourself no good?

550

Antigone

I also suffer, when I laugh at you.

Ismene

What further service can I do you now?

Antigone

To save yourself. I shall not envy you.

Ismene

Alas for me. Am I outside your fate?

Antigone

Yes. For you chose to live when I chose death.

Ismene

At least I was not silent. You were warned.

Antigone

Some will have thought you wiser. Some will not.

Ismene

And yet the blame is equal for us both.

Antigone

Take heart. You live. My life died long ago.

And that has made me fit to help the dead.

560

Creon

One of these girls has shown her lack of sense
just now. The other had it from her birth.

Ismene

Yes, lord. When people fall in deep distress
their native sense departs, and will not stay.

Creon

You chose your mind's distraction when you chose
to work out wickedness with this wicked girl.

Ismene

What life is there for me to live without her?

Creon

Don't speak of her. For she is here no more.

Ismene

But will you kill your own son's promised bride?

Creon

Oh, there are other furrows for his plough.

Ismene

But where the closeness that has bound these two?

570

Creon

Not for my sons will I choose wicked wives.

Ismene

Dear Haemon, your father robs you of your rights.

Creon

You and your marriage trouble me too much.

Ismene

You will take away his bride from your own son?

Creon

Yes. Death will help me break this marriage off.

Chorus

It seems determined that the girl must die.

Creon

You helped determine it. Now, no delay!

Slaves, take them in. They must be women now.

No more free running.

Even the bold will fly when they see Death
drawing in close enough to end their life.

580

(*Antigone and Ismene are taken inside.*)

Chorus

Fortunate they whose lives have no taste of pain.
For those whose house is shaken by the gods
escape no kind of doom. It extends to all the kin
like the wave that comes when the winds of Thrace
run over the dark of the sea.

The black sand of the bottom is brought from the depth; 590
the beaten capes sound back with a hollow cry.

Ancient the sorrow of Labdacus' house, I know.
Dead men's grief comes back, and falls on grief.
No generation can free the next.

One of the gods will strike. There is no escape.
So now the light goes out
for the house of Oedipus, while the bloody knife 600
cuts the remaining root. Folly and Fury have done this.

What madness of man, O Zeus, can bind your power?
Not sleep can destroy it who ages all,
nor the weariless months the gods have set. Unaged in time
monarch you rule of Olympus' gleaming light. 610
Near time, far future, and the past,
one law controls them all:
any greatness in human life brings doom.

Wandering hope brings help to many men.
But others she tricks from their giddy loves,
and her quarry knows nothing until he has walked into flame.
Word of wisdom it was when someone said, 620
"The bad becomes the good
to him a god would doom."
Only briefly is that one from under doom.

(*Haemon enters from the side.*)

Here is your one surviving son.
Does he come in grief at the fate of his bride,
in pain that he's tricked of his wedding? 630

Creon

Soon we shall know more than a seer could tell us.
Son, have you heard the vote condemned your bride?
And are you here, maddened against your father,
or are we friends, whatever I may do?

Haemon

My father, I am yours You keep me straight
with your good judgment, which I shall ever follow.
Nor shall a marriage count for more with me
than your kind leading.

Creon

There's my good boy. So should you hold at heart
and stand behind your father all the way.

640

It is for this men pray they may beget
households of dutiful obedient sons,
who share alike in punishing enemies,
and give due honor to their father's friends.

Whoever breeds a child that will not help
what has he sown but trouble for himself,
and for his enemies laughter full and free?

Son, do not let your lust mislead your mind,
all for a woman's sake, for well you know

how cold the thing he takes into his arms
who has a wicked woman for his wife.

650

What deeper wounding than a friend no friend?

Oh spit her forth forever, as your foe.

Let the girl marry somebody in Hades.

Since I have caught her in the open act,
the only one in town who disobeyed,

I shall not now proclaim myself a liar,
but kill her. Let her sing her song of Zeus
who guards the kindred.

If I allow disorder in my house

I'd surely have to licence it abroad.

660

A man who deals in fairness with his own,

he can make manifest justice in the state.
 But he who crosses law, or forces it,
 or hopes to bring the rulers under him,
 shall never have a word of praise from me.
 The man the state has put in place must have
 obedient hearing to his least command
 when it is right, and even when it's not.
 He who accepts this teaching I can trust,
 ruler, or ruled, to function in his place,
 to stand his ground even in the storm of spears,
 a mate to trust in battle at one's side.
 There is no greater wrong than disobedience.
 This ruins cities, this tears down our homes,
 this breaks the battle-front in panic-rout.
 If men live decently it is because
 discipline saves their very lives for them.
 So I must guard the men who yield to order,
 not let myself be beaten by a woman.
 Better, if it must happen, that a man
 should overset me.
 I won't be called weaker than womankind.

670

680

Chorus

We think—unless our age is cheating us—
 that what you say is sensible and right.

Haemon

Father, the gods have given men good sense,
 the only sure possession that we have.
 I couldn't find the words in which to claim
 that there was error in your late remarks.
 Yet someone else might bring some further light.
 Because I am your son I must keep watch
 on all men's doing where it touches you,
 their speech, and most of all, their discontents.
 Your presence frightens any common man
 from saying things you would not care to hear.

690

But in dark corners I have heard them say
 how the whole town is grieving for this girl,
 unjustly doomed, if ever woman was,
 to die in shame for glorious action done.
 She would not leave her fallen, slaughtered brother
 there, as he lay, unburied, for the birds
 and hungry dogs to make an end of him
 Isn't her real desert a golden prize?

This is the undercover speech in town.
 Father, your welfare is my greatest good.
 What loveliness in life for any child

700

outweighs a father's fortune and good fame?
 And so a father feels his children's faring.
 Then, do not have one mind, and one alone
 that only your opinion can be right
 Whoever thinks that he alone is wise,
 his eloquence, his mind, above the rest,
 come the unfolding, shows his emptiness
 A man, though wise, should never be ashamed

710

of learning more, and must unbend his mind.
 Have you not seen the trees beside the torrent,
 the ones that bend them saving every leaf,
 while the resistant perish root and branch?
 And so the ship that will not slacken sail,
 the sheet drawn tight, unyielding, overturns.
 She ends the voyage with her keel on top
 No, yield your wrath, allow a change of stand.

Young as I am, if I may give advice,
 I'd say it would be best if men were born
 perfect in wisdom, but that failing this
 (which often fails) it can be no dishonor
 to learn from others when they speak good sense.

720

Chorus

Lord, if your son has spoken to the point
 you should take his lesson. He should do the same
 Both sides have spoken well.

Creon

At my age I'm to school my mind by his?
This boy instructor is my master, then?

Haemon

I urge no wrong. I'm young, but you should watch
my actions, not my years, to judge of me.

Creon

A loyal action, to respect disorder?

730

Haemon

I wouldn't urge respect for wickedness.

Creon

You don't think she is sick with that disease?

Haemon

Your fellow-citizens maintain she's not.

Creon

Is the town to tell me how I ought to rule?

Haemon

Now there you speak just like a boy yourself.

Creon

Am I to rule by other mind than mine?

Haemon

No city is property of a single man.

Creon

But custom gives possession to the ruler.

Haemon

You'd rule a desert beautifully alone.

Creon (to the Chorus)

It seems he's firmly on the woman's side.

740

Haemon

If you're a woman. It is you I care for.

Creon

Wicked, to try conclusions with your father.

Haemon

When you conclude unjustly, so I must

Creon

Am I unjust, when I respect my office?

Haemon

You tread down the gods' due. Respect is gone.

Creon

Your mind is poisoned. Weaker than a woman!

Haemon

At least you'll never see me yield to shame.

Creon

Your whole long argument is but for her.

Haemon

And you, and me, and for the gods below.

Creon

You shall not marry her while she's alive.

750

Haemon

Then she shall die. Her death will bring another.

Creon

Your boldness has made progress. Threats, indeed!

Haemon

No threat, to speak against your empty plan.

Creon

Past due, sharp lessons for your empty brain.

Haemon

If you weren't father, I should call you mad.

Creon

Don't flatter me with "father," you woman's slave.

Haemon

You wish to speak but never wish to hear.

Creon

You think so? By Olympus, you shall not
revile me with these tauntings and go free.

Bring out the hateful creature; she shall die
full in his sight, close at her bridegroom's side.

760

Haemon

Not at my side her death, and you will not
ever lay eyes upon my face again.
Find other friends to rave with after this.

(Haemon leaves, by one of the side entrances.)

Chorus

Lord, he has gone with all the speed of rage.
When such a man is grieved his mind is hard.

Creon

Oh, let him go, plan superhuman action.
In any case the girls shall not escape.

Chorus

You plan for both the punishment of death?

770

Creon

Not her who did not do it. You are right.

Chorus

And what death have you chosen for the other?

Creon

To take her where the foot of man comes not.
There shall I hide her in a hollowed cave
living, and leave her just so much to eat
as clears the city from the guilt of death.
There, if she prays to Death, the only god
of her respect, she may manage not to die.
Or she may learn at last and even then
how much too much her labor for the dead.

780

(Creon returns to the palace.)

Chorus

Love unconquered in fight, love who falls on our havings.
You rest in the bloom of a girl's unwithered face.
You cross the sea, you are known in the wildest lairs.

Not the immortal gods can fly,
nor men of a day. Who has you within him is mad. 790

You twist the minds of the just. Wrong they pursue and are
ruined.

You made this quarrel of kindred before us now.

Desire looks clear from the eyes of a lovely bride:

power as strong as the founded world.

For there is the goddess at play with whom no man can fight. 800

(Antigone is brought from the palace under guard)

Now I am carried beyond all bounds.

My tears will not be checked.

I see Antigone depart

to the chamber where all men sleep.

Antigone

Men of my fathers' land, you see me go

my last journey. My last sight of the sun,

then never again. Death who brings all to sleep 810

takes me alive to the shore

of the river underground.

Not for me was the marriage-hymn, nor will anyone start the

song

at a wedding of mine. Acheron is my mate.

Chorus

With praise as your portion you go

in fame to the vault of the dead.

Untouched by wasting disease,

not paying the price of the sword, 820

of your own motion you go.

Alone among mortals will you descend

in life to the house of Death.

Antigone

Pitiful was the death that stranger died,

our queen once, Tantalus' daughter. The rock

it covered her over, like stubborn ivy it grew.

Still, as she wastes, the rain
and snow companion her.
Pouring down from her mourning eyes comes the water that
soaks the stone.

830

My own putting to sleep a god has planned like hers.

Chorus

God's child and god she was.
We are born to death.
Yet even in death you will have your fame,
to have gone like a god to your fate,
in living and dying alike.

Antigone

Laughter against me now. In the name of our fathers' gods,
could you not wait till I went? Must affront be thrown in my
face?

840

O city of wealthy men.
I call upon Dirce's spring,
I call upon Thebe's grove in the armored plain,
to be my witnesses, how with no friend's mourning,
by what decree I go to the fresh-made prison-tomb.
Alive to the place of corpses, an alien still,
never at home with the living nor with the dead.

850

Chorus

You went to the furthest verge
of daring, but there you found
the high foundation of justice, and fell.
Perhaps you are paying your father's pain.

Antigone

You speak of my darkest thought, my pitiful father's fame,
spread through all the world, and the doom that haunts our
house,
the royal house of Thebes.
My mother's marriage-bed.
Destruction where she lay with her husband-son,
my father. These are my parents and I their child.

860

I go to stay with them. My curse is to die unwed.
My brother, you found your fate when you found your bride, 870
found it for me as well Dead, you destroy my life

Chorus

You showed respect for the dead
So we for you. but power
is not to be thwarted so
Your self-sufficiency has brought you down

Antigone

Unwept, no wedding-song, unfriended, now I go
the road laid down for me.
No longer shall I see this holy light of the sun. 880
No friend to bewail my fate.

(Creon enters from the palace.)

Creon

When people sing the dirge for their own deaths
ahead of time, nothing will break them off
if they can hope that this will buy delay.
Take her away at once, and open up
the tomb I spoke of Leave her there alone.
There let her choose: death, or a buried life.
No stain of guilt upon us in this case,
but she is exiled from our life on earth. 890

Antigone

O tomb, O marriage-chamber, hollowed out
house that will watch forever, where I go.
To my own people, who are mostly there;
Persephone has taken them to her.
Last of them all, ill-fated past the rest,
shall I descend, before my course is run.
Still when I get there I may hope to find
I come as a dear friend to my dear father,
to you, my mother, and my brother too.
All three of you have known my hand in death. 900
I washed your bodies, dressed them for the grave,

poured out the last libation at the tomb.
 Last, Polyneices knows the price I pay
 for doing final service to his corpse.
 And yet the wise will know my choice was right.
 Had I had children or their father dead,
 I'd let them moulder. I should not have chosen
 in such a case to cross the state's decree.
 What is the law that lies behind these words?
 One husband gone, I might have found another,
 or a child from a new man in first child's place,
 but with my parents hid away in death,
 no brother, ever, could spring up for me.
 Such was the law by which I honored you.
 But Creon thought the doing was a crime,
 a dreadful daring, brother of my heart.
 So now he takes and leads me out by force.
 No marriage-bed, no marriage-song for me,
 and since no wedding, so no child to rear.
 I go, without a friend, struck down by fate,
 live to the hollow chambers of the dead.
 What divine justice have I disobeyed?
 Why, in my misery, look to the gods for help?
 Can I call any of them my ally?
 I stand convicted of impiety,
 the evidence my pious duty done
 Should the gods think that this is righteousness,
 in suffering I'll see my error clear.
 But if it is the others who are wrong
 I wish them no greater punishment than mine.

910

920

Chorus

The same tempest of mind
 as ever, controls the girl.

930

Creon

Therefore her guards shall regret
 the slowness with which they move.

Antigone

That word comes close to death

Creon

You are perfectly right in that

Antigone

O town of my fathers in Thebe's land,

O gods of our house.

I am led away at last.

Look, leaders of Thebes,

I am last of your royal line.

Look what I suffer, at whose command,

because I respected the right

940

*(Antigone is led away. The slow procession should begin during
the preceding passage.)*

Chorus

Danaë suffered too.

She went from the light to the brass-built room,
chamber and tomb together. Like you, poor child,
she was of great descent, and more, she held and kept
the seed of the golden rain which was Zeus.

950

Fate has terrible power.

You cannot escape it by wealth or war.

No fort will keep it out, no ships outrun it

Remember the angry king,
son of Dryas, who raged at the god and paid,
pent in a rock-walled prison. His bursting wrath
slowly went down. As the terror of madness went,
he learned of his frenzied attack on the god.

960

Fool, he had tried to stop
the dancing women possessed of god,
the fire of Dionysus, the songs and flutes.

Where the dark rocks divide
sea from sea in Thrace
is Salmydessus whose savage god

970

beheld the terrible blinding wounds
dealt to Phineus' sons by their father's wife.
Dark the eyes that looked to avenge their mother.
Sharp with her shuttle she struck, and blooded her hands.

Wasting they wept their fate,
settled when they were born
to Cleopatra, unhappy queen.

980

She was a princess too, of an ancient house,
reared in the cave of the wild north wind, her father
Half a goddess but, child, she suffered like you.

*(Enter, from the side Teiresias, the blind prophet,
led by a boy attendant)*

Teiresias

Elders of Thebes, we two have come one road,
two of us looking through one pair of eyes.
This is the way of walking for the blind

990

Creon

Teiresias, what news has brought you here?

Teiresias

I'll tell you. You in turn must trust the prophet.

Creon

I've always been attentive to your counsel.

Teiresias

And therefore you have steered this city straight

Creon

So I can say how helpful you have been.

Teiresias

But now you are balanced on a razor's edge.

Creon

What is it? How I shudder at your words!

Teiresias

You'll know, when you hear the signs that I have marked
I sat where every bird of heaven comes

1000

in my old place of augury, and heard
bird-cries I'd never known They screeched about
goaded by madness, inarticulate.
I marked that they were tearing one another
with claws of murder. I could hear the wing-beats.
I was afraid, so straight away I tried
burnt sacrifice upon the flaming altar.
No fire caught my offerings. Slimy ooze
dripped on the ashes, smoked and sputtered there.
Gall burst its bladder, vanished into vapor;
the fat dripped from the bones and would not burn.
These are the omens of the rites that failed,
as my boy here has told me. He's my guide
as I am guide to others.

1010

Why has this sickness struck against the state?
Through your decision.
All of the altars of the town are choked
with leavings of the dogs and birds; their feast
was on that fated, fallen Polyneices
So the gods will have no offering from us,
not prayer, nor flame of sacrifice. The birds
will not cry out a sound I can distinguish,
gorged with the greasy blood of that dead man.
Think of these things, my son. All men may err
but error once committed, he's no fool
nor yet unfortunate, who gives up his stiffness
and cures the trouble he has fallen in.
Stubbornness and stupidity are twins.
Yield to the dead. Why goad him where he lies?
What use to kill the dead a second time?
I speak for your own good. And I am right.
Learning from a wise counsellor is not pain
if what he speaks are profitable words.

1020

1030

Creon

Old man, you all, like bowmen at a mark,
have bent your bows at me. I've had my share

of seers. I've been an item in your accounts.
 Make profit, trade in Lydian silver-gold,
 pure gold of India; that's your chief desire.
 But you will never cover up that corpse.
 Not if the very eagles tear their food
 from him, and leave it at the throne of Zeus.
 I wouldn't give him up for burial
 in fear of that pollution. For I know
 no mortal being can pollute the gods.
 O old Teiresias, human beings fall;
 the clever ones the furthest, when they plead
 a shameful case so well in hope of profit.

1040

Teiresias

Alas!

What man can tell me, has he thought at all . . .

Creon

What hackneyed saw is coming from your lips?

Teiresias

How better than all wealth is sound good counsel.

1050

Creon

And so is folly worse than anything.

Teiresias

And you're infected with that same disease.

Creon

I'm reluctant to be uncivil to a seer . . .

Teiresias

You're that already. You have said I lie.

Creon

Well, the whole crew of seers are money-mad.

Teiresias

And the whole tribe of tyrants grab at gain.

Creon

Do you realize you are talking to a king?

Teiresias

I know. Who helped you save this town you hold?

Creon

You're a wise seer, but you love wickedness.

Teiresias

You'll bring me to speak the unspeakable, very soon.

1060

Creon

Well, speak it out. But do not speak for profit.

Teiresias

No, there's no profit in my words for you.

Creon

You'd better realise that you can't deliver
my mind, if you should sell it, to the buyer.

Teiresias

Know well, the sun will not have rolled its course
many more days, before you come to give
corpse for these corpses, child of your own loins.
For you've confused the upper and lower worlds.
You sent a life to settle in a tomb;
you keep up here that which belongs below
the corpse unburied, robbed of its release.
Not you, nor any god that rules on high
can claim him now.

1070

You rob the nether gods of what is theirs.
So the pursuing horrors lie in wait
to track you down. The Furies sent by Hades
and by all gods will even you with your victims.
Now say that I am bribed! At no far time
shall men and women wail within your house.
And all the cities that you fought in war
whose sons had burial from wild beasts, or dogs,
or birds that brought the stench of your great wrong
back to each hearth, they move against you now.
A bowman, as you said, I send my shafts,

1080

now you have moved me, straight. You'll feel the wound.
Boy, take me home now. Let him spend his rage
on younger men, and learn to calm his tongue,
and keep a better mind than now he does

1090

(Exit.)

Chorus

Lord, he has gone. Terrible prophecies!
And since the time when I first grew grey hair
his sayings to the city have been true.

Creon

I also know this. And my mind is torn.
To yield is dreadful. But to stand against him.
Dreadful to strike my spirit to destruction.

Chorus

Now you must come to counsel, and take advice.

Creon

What must I do? Speak, and I shall obey.

Chorus

Go free the maiden from that rocky house.
Bury the dead who lies in readiness.

1100

Creon

This is your counsel? You would have me yield?

Chorus

Quick as you can. The gods move very fast
when they bring ruin on misguided men.

Creon

How hard, abandonment of my desire.
But I can fight necessity no more.

Chorus

Do it yourself. Leave it to no one else.

Creon

I'll go at once. Come, followers, to your work.
You that are here round up the other fellows.

Take axes with you, hurry to that place
that overlooks us. 1110

Now my decision has been overturned
shall I, who bound her, set her free myself
I've come to fear it's best to hold the laws
of old tradition to the end of life.

(Exit)

Chorus

God of the many names, Semele's golden child,
child of Olympian thunder, Italy's lord.
Lord of Eleusis, where all men come 1120
to mother Demeter's plain
Bacchus, who dwell in Thebes,
by Ismenus' running water,
where wild Bacchic women are at home,
on the soil of the dragon seed.

Seen in the glaring flame, high on the double mount,
with the nymphs of Parnassus at play on the hill,
seen by Kastalia's flowing stream. 1130
You come from the ivied heights,
from green Euboea's shore.
In immortal words we cry
your name, lord, who watch the ways,
the many ways of Thebes.

This is your city, honored beyond the rest,
the town of your mother's miracle-death.
Now, as we wrestle our grim disease, 1140
come with healing step from Parnassus' slope
or over the moaning sea.

Leader in dance of the fire-pulsing stars,
overseer of the voices of night,
child of Zeus, be manifest,
with due companionship of Maenad maids 1150
whose cry is but your name.

(Enter one of those who left with Creon, as messenger.)

Messenger

Neighbors of Cadmus, and Amphion's house,
there is no kind of state in human life
which I now dare to envy or to blame.
Luck sets it straight, and luck she overturns
the happy or unhappy day by day.
No prophecy can deal with men's affairs.
Creon was envied once, as I believe,
for having saved this city from its foes
and having got full power in this land.
He steered it well. And he had noble sons.
Now everything is gone.
Yes, when a man has lost all happiness,
he's not alive. Call him a breathing corpse.
Be very rich at home. Live as a king.
But once your joy has gone, though these are left
they are smoke's shadow to lost happiness.

1160

1170

Chorus

What is the grief of princes that you bring?

Messenger

They're dead. The living are responsible.

Chorus

Who died? Who did the murder? Tell us now.

Messenger

Haemon is gone. One of his kin drew blood.

Chorus

But whose arm struck? His father's or his own?

Messenger

He killed himself. His blood is on his father.

Chorus

Seer, all too true the prophecy you told!

Messenger

This is the state of things. Now make your plans.

(Enter, from the palace, Eurydice.)

Chorus

Eurydice is with us now, I see. 1180
 Creon's poor wife She may have come by chance.
 She may have heard something about her son.

Eurydice

I heard your talk as I was coming out
 to greet the goddess Pallas with my prayer.
 And as I moved the bolts that held the door
 I heard of my own sorrow.
 I fell back fainting in my women's arms
 But say again just what the news you bring 1190
 I, whom you speak to, have known grief before.

Messenger

Dear lady, I was there, and I shall tell,
 leaving out nothing of the true account.
 Why should I make it soft for you with tales
 to prove myself a liar? Truth is right.
 I followed your husband to the plain's far edge,
 where Polyneices' corpse was lying still
 unpitied. The dogs had torn him all apart. 1200
 We prayed the goddess of all journeyings,
 and Pluto, that they turn their wrath to kindness,
 we gave the final purifying bath,
 then burned the poor remains on new-cut boughs,
 and heaped a high mound of his native earth.
 Then turned we to the maiden's rocky bed,
 death's hollow marriage-chamber.
 But, still far off, one of us heard a voice
 in keen lament by that unblest abode.
 He ran and told the master. As Creon came
 he heard confusion crying He groaned and spoke: 1210
 "Am I a prophet now, and do I tread
 the saddest of all roads I ever trod?
 My son's voice crying! Servants, run up close,

stand by the tomb and look, push through the crevice
where we built the pile of rock, right to the entry.
Find out if that is Haemon's voice I hear
or if the gods are tricking me indeed "

We obeyed the order of our mournful master.

In the far corner of the tomb we saw

1220

her, hanging by the neck, caught in a noose
of her own linen veiling

Haemon embraced her as she hung, and mourned
his bride's destruction, dead and gone below,
his father's actions, the unfated marriage.

When Creon saw him, he groaned terribly,
and went toward him, and called him with lament.

"What have you done, what plan have you caught up,
what sort of suffering is killing you?

Come out, my child, I do beseech you, come!"

1230

The boy looked at him with his angry eyes,
spat in his face and spoke no further word.

He drew his sword, but as his father ran,
he missed his aim. Then the unhappy boy,
in anger at himself, leant on the blade.

It entered, half its length, into his side.

While he was conscious he embraced the maiden,
holding her gently Last, he gasped out blood,
red blood on her white cheek.

Corpse on a corpse he lies. He found his marriage.

1240

Its celebration in the halls of Hades.

So he has made it very clear to men

that to reject good counsel is a crime.

(Eurydice returns to the house.)

Chorus

What do you make of this? The queen has gone
in silence. We know nothing of her mind.

Messenger

I wonder at her, too. But we can hope
that she has gone to mourn her son within

with her own women, not before the town.
She knows discretion She will do no wrong.

1250

Chorus

I am not sure. This muteness may portend
as great disaster as a loud lament.

Messenger

I will go in and see if some deep plan
hides in her heart's wild pain. You may be right.
There can be heavy danger in mute grief.

*(The messenger goes into the house. Creon enters with his
followers. They are carrying Haemon's body on a bier.)*

Chorus

But look, the king draws near.
His own hand brings
the witness of his crime,
the doom he brought on himself.

1260

Creon

O crimes of my wicked heart,
harshness bringing death.
You see the killer, you see the kin he killed.
My planning was all unblest.
Son, you have died too soon
Oh, you have gone away
through my fault, not your own.

Chorus

You have learned justice, though it comes too late.

1270

Creon

Yes, I have learned in sorrow. It was a god who struck,
who has weighted my head with disaster; he drove me to wild
strange ways,
his heavy heel on my joy.
Oh sorrows, sorrows of men.

(Re-enter the messenger, from a side door of the palace.)

Messenger

Master, you hold one sorrow in your hands
but you have more, stored up inside the house. 1280

Creon

What further suffering can come on me?

Messenger

Your wife has died. The dead man's mother in deed,
poor soul, her wounds are fresh.

Creon

Hades, harbor of all,
you have destroyed me now.
Terrible news to hear, horror the tale you tell. 1290
I was dead, and you kill me again.
Boy, did I hear you right?
Did you say the queen was dead,
slaughter on slaughter heaped?

(The central doors of the palace begin to open.)

Chorus

Now you can see. Concealment is all over.

(The doors are open, and the corpse of Eurydice is revealed.)

Creon

My second sorrow is here. Surely no fate remains
which can strike me again. Just now, I held my son in my arms.
And now I see her dead.
Woe for the mother and son. 1300

Messenger

There, by the altar, dying on the sword,
her eyes fell shut. She wept her older son
who died before, and this one. Last of all
she cursed you as the killer of her children.

Creon

I am mad with fear. Will no one strike
and kill me with cutting sword?
Sorrowful, soaked in sorrow to the bone! 1310

Messenger

Yes, for she held you guilty in the death
of him before you, and the elder dead.

Creon

How did she die?

Messenger

Struck home at her own heart
when she had heard of Haemon's suffering.

Creon

This is my guilt, all mine. I killed you, I say it clear.
Servants, take me away, out of the sight of men.
I who am nothing more than nothing now.

1320

Chorus

Your plan is good—if any good is left.
Best to cut short our sorrow.

Creon

Let me go, let me go. May death come quick,
bringing my final day.
O let me never see tomorrow's dawn.

1330

Chorus

That is the future's. We must look to now.
What will be is in other hands than ours.

Creon

All my desire was in that prayer of mine.

Chorus

Pray not again. No mortal can escape
the doom prepared for him.

Creon

Take me away at once, the frantic man who killed
my son, against my meaning. I cannot rest.
My life is warped past cure. My fate has struck me down.

1340

(Creon and his attendants enter the house.)

Chorus

Our happiness depends
on wisdom all the way.
The gods must have their due.
Great words by men of pride
bring greater blows upon them.
So wisdom comes to the old.

1350

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

THE foregoing is a translation of the text of Jebb's third edition (Cambridge, 1900) In the dialogue, I have tried to bring into English almost all that I thought I saw in the Greek, even though this was to run the risk of a clumsy literalism In the choruses, I have taken more freedom.

The following are the places where my rendering is of another text than Jebb's

486 *δμαιμονεστέρας* A, other MSS, and the scholiast in L. *δμαιμονεστέρα* L, as corrected from *-ais*, Jebb.

The extravagance of imagining the impossible possibility of closer blood kin than a sister seems to me in character for Creon at this point. (For a similar use of language, cf Aeschylus *Septem* 197.)

519 *τούτους* MSS and Jebb. *ἴσους* is recorded by L's scholiast and read by Pearson. Line 520 seems even more pointed if Creon is picking up Antigone's own term to throw at her.

572. This line is Ismene's in all the manuscripts The only traditional evidence for giving it to Antigone is that the Aldine edition (1502) and Turnebus (1553) gave it to her. These editors may have had manuscript evidence lost to us. But they may also, like most modern editors, including Jebb, have been exercising their own sense of fitness. It is touching to have an Antigone stung from her silence to defend her lover Further, if the line is not hers, we are faced with an Antigone who never mentions him; and much has been built on this

The best argument for giving her the line is Creon's reply to it (573). If Ismene has 572 "your marriage" must mean "the marriage you talk of," or words to that effect. This is possible, but the phrase would certainly come out more naturally to Antigone.

Confusions of speakers in stichomythia are many, and I see no possibility of certainty here. It is our misfortune that the line in question is an important one. I have stayed with the manuscripts, which seems to me all one can do.

574. This is Ismene's line in all MSS. Boeckh, followed by Jebb, gave it to the chorus. I have followed my own precedent in 572, and stayed with the MSS. The question might come, as Jebb argues, more reasonably from the chorus than from Ismene, who has had her answer already. But she is not too logical to ask the same appalling question twice

600 *κόνις* MSS, Jebb *κοπίς* Reiske and others, Jebb in earlier editions, Pearson. See Jebb's note and appendix He was of two minds here. My own final feeling is that for dust to be doing the reaping is too much, even for a tragic chorus.

609 *παντογήρως* L, the MSS generally, L's scholiast *παντ'ἀγρέων*, Jebb. This image was too strained for Jebb (and many others), as the dust in 600 was for me. De gustibus . . .

904-20. Jebb (following and followed by many) brackets these lines, which are in all the MSS, and were known to Aristotle as Antigone's. I think he is wrong, but he should not be pilloried as a prudish Victorian for this The positions of his note and appendix are well taken and held. Some sensible contemporaries (e g., Fitts and Fitzgerald) are with him still For those, like myself, who are sure the lines are Antigone's, there is drama in her abandoning her moralities and clinging to her irrational profundity of feeling for her lost and irreplaceable brother, devising legalistic arguments for her intellectual justification. Jebb finds the syntax of 909-12 strained past all bearing, but I believe Antigone's obscurity here a touch of realism parallel to the confused and contradictory negatives of her opening lines, which Jebb allows her.

AJAX

Translated and with an Introduction by

JOHN MOORE



INTRODUCTION TO *AJAX*

THE *Ajax* is probably the earliest of the seven plays by Sophocles which are preserved. The *Antigone* is generally thought to have been produced in 442 or 441 B C, and the *Ajax* appears to belong to the same period of Sophocles' work. In dramatic technique these plays have not the suppleness of the *Oedipus*, but they are in no sense to be regarded as immature works. At the time he produced the *Antigone*, Sophocles was already fifty-five years old and had been producing tragedies in the Theatre of Dionysus for a quarter of a century. The *Ajax*, too, is the work not of a novice but of a seasoned dramatist. It is a play of very remarkable beauties and likewise of some perplexities

The subject which Sophocles has chosen is the shame and death of Ajax, which follow on his defeat in the contest for Achilles' armor, and the growth, in and after this shame and death and triumphing over them, of a revealed sense of his heroic virtue and magnanimity. It will be seen that this subject is a single subject: the death of Ajax, taken quite simply in itself, completes nothing; the play's action is complete only when the spectator is brought to an altered estimate of the meaning of Ajax' career and destiny.

Throughout the drama, Ajax remains the central issue and our principal concern. Sophocles' judgment of him is not simple: he sees that Ajax and the Ajax-world of value and aspiration have their limitations in point of sympathy and insight; and the sense of these limitations is in part conveyed to us by means of the figure of Odysseus. Yet to imagine, as some writers have done, that the structure of the play is a polarity, so to speak, between Ajax and Odysseus is surely a distortion. The major dramatic subject, the weight and heft of it, is Ajax. The greatness of his demand upon life is the thing that we must, above all, be made to feel; and Sophocles places this theme before us by the full dramatization he gives of Ajax' suffering and resolution, of the dismay and pathetic dependence of those around him, and of their desolation when his protection is removed.

Sophocles' version of the myth is not original with him; he chose it from among the epic treatments which were already familiar. It is interesting, though, that he chose the version of the story which is most discreditable to Ajax. Pindar, writing a generation before Sophocles, follows a different version in which there is no hint of any attempt by Ajax to murder the Greek chieftains, no lunacy, and no assault upon the livestock. Ajax is simply filled with chagrin because of his disappointment and falls upon his sword. This version suited Pindar's artistic purpose very well: it provided him with a single arresting picture of outraged merit which could serve for a telling allusion and no more. For a dramatist, though, there were richer possibilities in the ghastlier version of the story which emphasized Ajax' criminality and disgrace. In choosing this version Sophocles incurred one serious embarrassment: his hero has *ex hypothesi* been guilty of a foul and treacherous attempt to assassinate the men who have wronged him, and in the prosecution of his plan he has come to grief in a most unseemly way. Sophocles surmounts the difficulty with his usual dexterity. He contrives in the main to make us lose sight of Ajax' criminality, while making of his ignominy a capital dramatic resource. The disclosure of Ajax in his tent, fouled by the animals he has insanely tormented and killed, is more than a powerful *coup de théâtre*; it is a fearful and summary image of total degradation not merely of heroic, but of all human, value. The process by which this image is transformed and Ajax' disaster irradiated by his recovery of heroic strength and human relatedness is the true action of the play.

This process is already well begun by the end of the long scene in which Ajax is disclosed among the slaughtered animals. The scene ends harshly, and, indeed, it is marked throughout by a certain acerbity. Nevertheless, out of his chagrin and misery Ajax is able to reaffirm some part of his former image of himself: rather than endure disgrace, he is resolved to die. There is a moment of tenderness for Eurysaces, none at all for Tecmessa; and even the address to Eurysaces, one feels, is an uncompromising assertion of the quality of Ajax more than a response to the child.

In the next scene he appears an altered man. Not wholly so: his

purpose is unchanged. But he discovers in himself, rather to his surprise, a softening of his former harshness. He is touched now by the plight of his wife and child, they must be deceived, so that he may have an opportunity of doing in peace what he has to do; but he deceives them tenderly, expressing his true intentions, but in ambiguous words which they are bound to misunderstand. Thus the speech is a farewell to them, while at the same time it expresses a new attitude in him. His suicide is not to be a frantic gesture of despair: it will be performed composedly, on the seashore, and, when the act is done, he, or something of him, will be saved (*sesômenon*). The softening of temper which this scene registers is therefore a necessary step in the development of the drama, and the splendid lines in which Ajax compares the softening of his own severity to the yielding of the great stern things in Nature before their gentler opposites have a deep psychological appropriateness.

The scenes which now follow are an impressive example of Sophocles' skill in dramatic organization. As Ajax leaves, sword in hand, bent as we know upon suicide, the Chorus break into an ecstatic song of joy, for they have been deceived by Ajax' words no less than Tecmessa and Eurysaces. At once the messenger arrives with news of the alarming prognostications of Calchas: if Ajax has left his tent, there is no hope for him. Joy and relief are now replaced by terror; Tecmessa understands that she has been deceived; and she and the Chorus in great agitation leave the scene, in haste to forestall Ajax' death.

But Ajax appears, calmly making his preparations (we understand that the scene has changed, as it does sometimes, though rarely, in Greek tragedy—we are now in the place Ajax has chosen by the shore). His death speech is long, eloquent, and handsome. He prays for a quiet death and for his body to be discovered first by Teucer; he calls the Sun-God to carry the news to his home, and the Erinyes to pursue his enemies; and, lastly, he makes his farewell to the world above and his addresses to the world below. Athena is not present by even a mention to disturb the harmonious order of the scene. True, he does not forgive his enemies: to forgive your enemies when you are dying and they surviving is an impulse which lies outside the

ethical universe of Sophocles, unless there is a hint of it, and that doubtful, in *Antigone*.

Upon this splendid and now silent solitude Tecmessa and the Chorus urgently break in: the search, the discovery, the broken-hearted cries of grief come rapidly, one upon the other. Those whom Ajax has left are now helpless. They are threatened in every conceivable way; they cannot vindicate Ajax or protect themselves. Only for us Tecmessa's beautiful words (which this translator is helpless to render) may express a portion of the response that seems to be appropriate. Evidently the drama cannot end here, and if Sophocles has not found an entirely happy solution to the problem of how to conclude it, that is not because no conclusion was necessary. Beyond question, we attend to the long wrangle between Teucer and the Atreidae with a sense of diminished tragic feeling, not, however, for the reason that the question of Ajax' burial cannot concern us but because the mode selected or enforced upon Sophocles here, that of the set debate, entails a disastrous lowering of tone. The right argument for burial is Odysseus' argument, not Teucer's; and in the *Antigone* the heroine makes no corresponding defense of Polynices.

The *Ajax* has, then, its imperfections and defects. The role of Athena is perplexing, not to say fiendish. Sophocles ignores with perhaps somewhat too ready a skill our repugnance at Ajax' conduct. The wrangle at the end seems unduly prolonged and at times undignified. But all this counts for little in comparison with the admirable and central virtue of the *Ajax*, its sustained and noble affirmation of the heroic in human life, as expressed in Ajax himself, and its rendering in Tecmessa of the beauty of entire devotion.

In making this translation I have followed the text of Sir Richard Jebb.

CHARACTERS

Athena

Odysseus

Ajax

Chorus of Salaminian Sailors

Tecmessa

Messenger

Teucer

Menelaus

Agamemnon

AJAX

SCENE: *Before the "tent" of Ajax, a fairly considerable structure covered with canvas and equipped with a large principal door and a second door on the flank, which gives access to a lower lateral extension of the structure. As the play opens, the goddess Athena is revealed on a high platform which may be conveniently placed over the lateral extension of the tent. Odysseus enters and moves eagerly across the stage as though tracing footprints.*

Athena

Odysseus, I have always seen and marked you
Stalking to pounce upon your enemies;
And now by the tent of Ajax, where he keeps
Last place upon the shore, I find you busy
Tracing and scanning these fresh tracks of his,
New-printed on the sand, to guess if he's inside.
You've coursed him like a keen Laconian hound.
In fact, he has just come in. His head is moist with sweat,
His murderous hands are moistened too. . . . But now 10
You need not go on peering in—no, tell me,
What is the reason for your eager search?
For I have knowledge and can set you right.

Odysseus

Voice of Athena, dearest utterance
Of all the gods' to me—I cannot see you,
And yet how clearly I can catch your words,
That speak as from a trumpet's throat of bronze!
You guess my purpose; I have been circling
Steadily on the trail of a man I hate,
Shield-bearing Ajax. 20
He has done a thing—sometime last night it was—
An act of staggering horror . . . aimed at us,

If it all can be believed; nothing about it
 Is surely known—we are floundering in conjecture,
 And I have volunteered to search it out.
 This much is sure: we found not long ago
 Our flocks and herds of captured beasts all ruined
 And struck with havoc by some butchering hand.
 Their guards were slaughtered with them. Everyone
 Puts the blame of it on Ajax. One man saw him
 Alone, bounding over the plain and carrying
 A sword still wet with blood—this man informed me
 And set me on the track I leapt to the scent
 At once; and partly I can trace it still,
 Though partly, too, I'm baffled. How can these prints be his?
 You come just as I need you. Now and always,
 As heretofore, your hand shall be my guide

30

Athena

I know, Odysseus;
 Some time ago I felt your need and came
 On the path to guard and help you in your chase.

Odysseus

Tell me, dear mistress: am I working to some purpose?

Athena

Yes, this is the man that did the things you speak of.

Odysseus

What motive, though, prompted that senseless hand?

40

Athena

He was aggrieved, because of Achilles' armor.

Odysseus

But why this wild assault upon the flocks?

Athena

Ah, he thought it was your murder that fouled his hands.

Odysseus

It was a stroke, then, aimed at the whole Greek army?

Athena

A successful one, if I had not been watchful.

Odysseus

What desperate daring nerved him to the thing?

Athena

In the night he was moving upon you, stealthily and alone.

Odysseus

Did he come close? Was he reaching near his goal?

Athena

To the very doors of the two supreme commanders

Odysseus

And how did he check that hand that yearned for murder?

50

Athena

I checked him; I threw before his eyes
Obsessive notions, thoughts of insane joy,
To fall on the mingled droves of captured livestock,
The undistributed loot which the herdsmen had in charge.
He hit them,
Hewed out a weltering shambles of horned beasts,
Cleaving them down in a circle all around him.
Sometimes he thought he held the sons of Atreus
In his grip to kill them, and then again
His fancy would seize some other of the chiefs
The man was wandering in diseased delusions;
I pressed him, urged him into the fatal net.
At last, when he was weary of the slaughter,
He hobbled the cattle that were still alive,
And the sheep, and brought them to his tent, thinking
It was men he had captured and not poor horned beasts.
And now he has them bound inside the lodge
And is tormenting them. But I shall show you
His madness in plain view Take note of it;
Then you can publish it to all the Greeks.

60

(Odysseus shrinks back.)

Get a grip on your nerves and wait. It's no disaster
To see the man. I'll turn his glance away.
He'll never see you or know your face. Halloo!
You there, who are binding fast your captives' arms
With fetters, come outside! Ajax! Come out!

70

Odysseus

Athena, what can you be thinking of?
Don't call him out!

Athena

Quiet, now! No cowardice!

Odysseus

No, no, for heaven's sake!
I'd very much rather he stayed inside.

Athena

What are you afraid of? He was only a man before.

Odysseus

Yes, but he was my enemy and still is.

Athena

But to laugh at your enemies—
What sweeter laughter can there be than that?

Odysseus

It's enough for me if he stays just where he is.

80

Athena

You're afraid, then, to see a madman face to face?

Odysseus

Certainly if he were sane, I should never shrink from him.

Athena

No need to do so now. He will stand near you,
And yet not see you.

Odysseus

How is that possible, if he sees with the same eyes still?

Athena

I can darken even the most brilliant vision.

Odysseus

I know that a god's contriving may do anything.

Athena

Be still, then, and remain right where you are.

Odysseus

If I must, I must. But I wish I were anywhere but here!

Athena

Ajax, I call you once again!

Is this how much you care for your old ally?

90

*(Ajax enters through the principal door of the tent, carrying a
two-thonged leather whip)*

Ajax

Hail, Athena! Daughter of Zeus,

Hail and welcome! How well you have stood by me!

I shall deck you with trophies all of gold

From the spoils of this hunting, in thanksgiving.

Athena

Excellent. But tell me, did you dip

Your blade well in the Greeks' blood?

Ajax

I think I may boast as much. I don't deny it

Athena

Did you move your weaponed hand against the generals?

Ajax

I don't think they will slight Ajax again.

Athena

The men are dead, if I understand you correctly.

Ajax

Dead they are. Let them rob my armor now!

100

Athena

Tell me, please, what happened to Laertes' son?
He didn't escape you?

Ajax

Oho, that villainous sneak! You want to know where *he* is?

Athena

Yes. Your adversary, you know. Odysseus

Ajax

He's sitting there inside, my sweetest prisoner
I don't intend for him to die just yet.

Athena

What are you going to do first?

Ajax

First bind him to the pole that props my barrack.

Athena

Poor miserable man! What treatment will you give him?

Ajax

Crimson his back with this whip first, then kill him.

110

Athena

Poor wretch! In pity don't mistreat him so!

Ajax

Have your way, goddess, in all else, and welcome.
But that man's punishment shall not be changed.

Athena

Well, then, if your good pleasure wills it so,
Do execution, carry out all you have in mind.

Ajax

I must be at my work. Goddess, I grant you this:
Stand always my ally as you have today.

(*Exit.*)

Athena

Do you see, Odysseus, how great the gods' power is?

Who was more full of foresight than this man,
Or abler, do you think, to act with judgment?

120

Odysseus

None that I know of. Yet I pity
His wretchedness, though he is my enemy,
For the terrible yoke of blindness that is on him.
I think of him, yet also of myself;
For I see the true state of all us that live—
We are dim shapes, no more, and weightless shadow.

Athena

Look well at this, and speak no towering word
Yourself against the gods, nor walk too grandly
Because your hand is weightier than another's,
Or your great wealth deeper founded. One short day
Inclines the balance of all human things
To sink or rise again. Know that the gods
Love men of steady sense and hate the proud

130

(Exeunt)

(Enter the Chorus of Salaminian sailors)

Chorus

Son of Telamon, lord of the firm floor
Of Salamis, where the sea chafes and swirls,
Ajax, my lord,
When you are fortunate, I too feel gladness;
But when the fury of Zeus or the virulent
Slur of the Greeks' slander
Strikes you, I shrink in fear, and my eye
Like a bird's, like a dove's, shows terror.
Now out of this fading night
Come huge oppressive rumors of dismay,
Wretched and shameful;
For you, they say, in the dark went striding out
Over the horse-delighting grassland,
Swinging your bright sword, slaughtering and wasting
All that remained of booty,

140

Flocks and herds belonging to the host
 Such tales as these, whisperings and fabrications,
 Odysseus is supplying to every ear,
 And many believe him. For as he speaks of you, 150
 His words win credit, and each new hearer
 More than the teller relishes his chance
 To insult at your distress.
 Strike at a great man, and you will not miss;
 But if one should bend such slander at me,
 None would believe him Envy stalks
 After magnates of wealth and power,
 Yet humble men without their princes
 Are a frail prop for a fortress. They
 Should be dependent upon the great, 160
 And the great be upheld by lesser ones.
 But the shallow cannot be taught these things—
 They raise instead an ignorant clamor;
 And against it we have no defense, my lord,
 But you. When once they are out of your sight,
 They screech like a gaggle of angry birds;
 But fear of the huge falcon,
 All of a sudden, I think,
 If you should only appear, 170
 Would make them cower and be still.

Strophe

Can it have been wild, bull-consorting Artemis
 That stirred you, evil Tale,
 Mother of my disgrace, to move against the flocks?
 Was she angered perhaps for victory-dues unpaid,
 Or disappointed of rich captured arms,
 Or hunting recompense for a stag slain?
 Or was it Enyalios, the bronze-cased Lord of War
 That blamed *our* lord's co-operant spear,
 And spitefully paid him out in the night's error? 180

Antistrophe

For never, son of Telamon, of your own heart's prompting,
 Would you so far have strayed
 To fall upon the flocks. Yet Frenzy comes
 When the gods will Apollo and Zeus forbend
 These tales be true that the Greeks are spreading!
 Yet if the high kings
 Or Sisyphus' execrated son
 Weave with false art a suppositious tale, 190
 Guard us from that false speech—
 Hide not, so, your face in your tent beside the sea.

Epode

Rise, up from the place
 Where you sit so obdurate, forbearing to fight your cause,
 While ruin flares toward heaven,
 And your enemies' bold outrage
 Freshens through all the glades
 In a blast of ringing laughter and hard spite.
 But I am fixed in my grief. 200

(Enter Tecmessa from the tent.)

Tecmessa

Mariners who serve with Ajax,
 Our prince of the old and kingly line
 Sprung from Athenian earth, we
 Who care for him and his father's far-off home
 Have cause indeed for grief;
 For he, our great grim man of power, lies low,
 And a troubling flood is on him.

Chorus

But what, succeeding to yesterday's
 Load of wretchedness, has this night brought?
 Tell us, daughter of Phrygian Teleutas; 210
 For the valiant Ajax loves you,
 And honors his spear-won bride—
 Being near him, perhaps you have knowledge and can speak.

Tecmessa

But how shall I speak a thing that appalls my speech?
 You shall hear too clearly of an accident
 Awful as death.
 Madness has seized our noble Ajax;
 He has come to ignominy in the night
 What a sight is to be seen within the tent!
 Victims, slain with his own hand, deep in blood,
 As for an oracle, speakingly reveal him.

220

Chorus

Strophe

You have vouched it true, then, that report of our fiery chief,
 That tale we cannot bear, yet may not escape:
 Huge it grows, and authoritative voices
 Give it huge reinforcement. Oh, I fear
 For that which is moving upon us. He will be done to death,
 Our glorious prince, because
 With frenzied hands and a dark sword he slew
 Herds and their mounted guardians in a heap.

230

Tecmessa

Alas, then, it can only have been from there
 That he brought those bound beasts home!
 And some he slew on the tent's floor
 Cleanly with a neck-cut; others he hacked asunder
 With slashes at their ribs. But two special
 White-footed rams he lifted up, shore off
 One's head and the tip of its tongue, and cast them from him;
 The other he bound upright against a pillar,
 Seized a stout length of harness, made from it
 A singing whip, two-thonged, to lash him with,
 And, mid the blows, poured forth such awful curses
 As no man, but some demon, must have taught him.

240

Chorus

Antistrophe

Now is the time for a man to muffle his head

And over the land to urge his stealthy way,
Or else, sitting the thwarts to row,
To trust his life to a ship's swift course on the deep— 250
Such are the threats that the sons of Atreus, two in power,
Stir toward us. I am in dread to share
With him the blows and hurt of the killing stone;
For an awful thing to be near is the doom that holds him.

Tecmessa

No longer so After the lightning
Flash and leap of the storm-wind,
He is calm But now, being clear in mind,
He is freshly miserable. It is a painful thing
To look at your own trouble and know 260
That you yourself and no one else has made it.

Chorus

But still, if his fit is past, I should think he was lucky;
A seizure, once it is done with, matters less.

Tecmessa

If someone posed the question, which would you choose:
To grieve your friends while feeling joy yourself,
Or to be wretched with them, shares alike?

Chorus

The last, lady, is twice as bad a thing.

Tecmessa

We are ill no longer now, but merely ruined.

Chorus

What do you mean? I cannot understand you. 270

Tecmessa

Ajax, so long as the mad fit was on him,
Himself felt joy at all his wretchedness,
Though we, his sane companions, grieved indeed.
But now that he's recovered and breathes clear,
His own anguish totally masters him,

While we are no less wretched than before.

Is not this a redoubling of our grief?

Chorus

You are quite right. Lady, I wonder

If a fearful blow of God's anger may have hit him.

It is strange that he feels no happier sane than raving.

280

Tecmessa

Strange, perhaps. But the facts are as they are.

Chorus

How at the start did this catastrophe

Swoop down? Tell us: we share the pain of it.

Tecmessa

Indeed, you are partners and shall hear it all.

In the depth of night, after the evening flares

Had all gone out, Ajax, with sword in hand,

Went slowly groping toward the door, intent

Upon some pointless errand. I objected,

And said, "Ajax, what are you doing? Why

Do you stir? No messenger has summoned you:

You have heard no trumpet. Why, the whole army now's
asleep!"

290

He answered briefly in a well-worn phrase,

"Woman, a woman's decency is silence."

I heard, and said no more; he issued forth alone.

I don't know what horrors occurred outside,

But when he came back in, he brought with him

A mass of hobbled bulls and shepherd dogs

And woolly captives. He struck the heads off some;

Others' he severed with an upward cut;

And some, held fast in bonds, he kept abusing

With words and blows, as though they were human beings—

And all the while he was vexing poor dumb beasts.

300

At length he darted out the door and spoke

Wild, rending words, directed toward some phantom,

Exulting with a harsh laugh *how he'd paid them,*

Odysseus and the sons of Atreus. Then

He sprang back in again, and somehow, slowly,
 By painful stages came to his right mind.
 And when he saw his dwelling full of Ruin,
 He beat his head and bellowed. There he sat,
 Wreckage himself among the wreck of corpses,
 The sheep slaughtered; and in an anguished gripe
 Of fist and fingernail he clutched his hair. 310
 He sat so, without speaking, for some time;
 Then finally spoke those fearful, threatening words—
 What should befall me if I failed to say
 What had befallen him: he asked me where he stood.
 Friends, I was terrified by all he'd done,
 And told him, simply, everything I knew.
 Then he cried out—long wails of shattering pain,
 Like none I ever heard from him before;
 He always used to say such cries were base,
 Marks of an abject spirit. His own way 320
 Was not to cry aloud in his distress,
 But low and muffled, like a roaring bull.
 Now, though, quite overcome by his misfortune,
 Refusing food and drink, he sits there motionless,
 Relapsed among the beasts his iron brought down.
 There are clear signs, too,
 That he's aiming to do some dreadful thing; his words
 And his lamentations both somehow suggest it.
 Friends—this was the thing I came to ask of you—
 Won't you come in and comfort him, if you can?
 He is noble, and may listen to his friends. 330

Chorus

Honored Tecmessa, what a fearful frenzy,
 By your account, his griefs have moved him to!

*(Ajax inside the tent gives a heavy groan, which rises
 slowly almost to a shriek.)*

Tecmessa

Worse may be coming. Didn't you hear his voice,
 Ajax', distorted in that ghastly cry?

(*Ajax groans again miserably.*)

Chorus

Either he still is mad, or else can't bear
The company his madness made around him.

Ajax (within)

Boy! Where is my child?

Tecmessa

Dear God! Eurysaces, it's you he's calling.
What can he want? Where are you? What shall I do?

340

Ajax (within)

Teucer! Where are you? Where is my brother Teucer?
Will that raid of his last forever? And I here perishing!

Chorus

No, he seems to be sane. Open the door.
Perhaps seeing someone, though it's only us,
May help him to compose himself.

*Tecmessa (opens the door, revealing Ajax sitting dejectedly in the
middle of slaughtered bulls and sheep)*

There, now you see.
You can judge for yourself the state of his affairs,
And how the man is too.

Ajax

Ah!
Loved mariners, my only friends,
Still faithful in the old proved way,
Look at this swirling tide of grief
And the storm of blood behind it,
Coursing around and round me.

350

Chorus

Horrible!
Tecmessa, what you told us was too true—
Insanity stands here revealed indeed!

Ajax

Antistrophe

Ah!

Stout hearts and skilful seamen,

Strong hands to move the oar,

I see no friend but you,

No, none, to ease my pain.

For God's sake, help me die!

360

Chorus

Hush! Check those awful words!

Don't seek a worse cure for an ill disease,

And make your pain still heavier than it is.

Ajax

Strophe

Here I am, the bold, the valiant,

Unflinching in the shock of war,

A terrible threat to unsuspecting beasts.

Oh! what a mockery I have come to! What indignity!

Tecmessa

Ajax, my lord and master,

I beg you not to say such things.

Ajax

Go away! Take yourself out of my sight!

370

(*He groans.*)

Chorus

In God's name, be more gentle and more temperate.

Ajax

How could I be so cursed?

To let those precious villains out of my hand,

And fall on goats and cattle,

On crumpled horns and splendid flocks,

Shedding their dark blood!

Chorus

The thing is done. Why wail about it now?

You cannot make it undone.

Ajax

Antistrophe

Ah, yes, son of Laertes
 Spying everywhere, always
 The tool of every mischief,
 Filthiest scoundrel of all the army,
 What a huge laugh you're laughing now, what gloating!

380

Chorus

It is God's giving if we laugh or weep.

Ajax

Ah, if I could just once catch sight of him!
 Crushed as I am, I'd . . .

Chorus (interrupting)

My lord, no blustering words.
 Your situation's desperate; can't you see?

Ajax

Zeus, father of my fathers,
 How can I strike them down,
 That devious, hateful rogue and the two joined kings,
 And last find death myself?

390

Tecmessa

When you pray that prayer, why, pray for my death too;
 Why should I live when once my lord is dead?

Ajax

Strophe

O
 Darkness that is my light,
 Murk of the underworld, my only brightness,
 Oh, take me to yourself to be your dweller,
 Receive and keep me. I cannot look
 To any of the race of gods for help,
 Being no longer worthy,
 Nor yet to humankind.
 But the martial goddess, daughter of Zeus, cruelly works my ruin.

400

Where shall a man flee?
Where shall I turn for refuge?
All that I was has perished
With these poor creatures here,
And I abused by a fool's dream
Of stalk and capture. Friends, friends,
The massed army will take my life
With bloody insistent blows.

Tecmessa

What wretchedness, to hear a brave man speak
Such words as once he would not deign to use!

410

Ajax

Antistrophe

O
Sounding straits of the sea
Caves by the sea's edge, meadows on the shore,
Long and long have you kept me here in Troyland;
But now I shall not revive again, never again—
A man of sense may know it.
Scamander, neighboring river, gentle to Greeks,
You shall no longer see this man,
Such a man (let me now speak my boast)
As Troy ne'er saw the like of, not in all
The warlike host that hither came from Greece.
But now in dishonor
I lie abject.

420

Chorus

I cannot bid you stifle such great griefs;
And yet it is agony to hear your grieving.

Ajax

Agony. Who would have thought my name and fortune
Could square so well together! My name is Ajax:
Agony is its meaning. And my fortunes
Are cause indeed for an agony of wailing,

430

Cause and enough twice over. How my father,
 Fighting here under Ida long ago,
 Won with his sword the loveliest prize of all
 For valor, and sweet praise at his return;
 But I, his son,
 Coming in my turn with a force no less
 To this same land of Troy, no less than he a champion,
 Nor less deserving, yet am left an outcast,
 Shamed by the Greeks, to perish as I do!
 And yet I seem to know this simple truth:
 If the bestowing of the famous armor
 Had rested with Achilles while he lived,
 To give them as a war-prize to the bravest,
 No rival then would have filched them from my hands,
 But now the sons of Atreus have contrived
 That a man of most dishonest mind should have them,
 Pushing my claims aside. And I say this,
 That if my eyes and mind had not leapt whirling
 Wide from my aim, those two would never again
 Cheat anyone with their awards and ballots!
 But, instead, the fierce-eyed, overpowering
 Daughter of Zeus, just then as I was readying
 My hand and plot against them, set me sprawling,
 Distraught and frenzied, and I dipped my hands
 In the blood of beasts like these. And now they are laughing
 And triumph in their clear escape, which I
 Never intended for them. But when God
 Strikes harm, a worse man often foils his better.
 And now, Ajax—what is to be done now?
 I am hated by the gods, that's plain; the Greek camp hates me:
 Troy and the ground I stand upon detest me.
 Shall I go, then, from this place where the ships ride,
 Desert the Atridae, and cross the Aegean to my home?
 But when I'm there,
 What countenance can I show my father Telamon?
 How will he ever stand the sight of me

440

450

460

If I come before him naked, armed with no glory,
 When he himself won chaplets of men's praise?
 That won't bear thinking of. Well, then,
 Shall I make a rush against the walls of Troy,
 Join with them all in single combat, do
 Some notable exploit, and find my death in it?
 But that might give some comfort to the sons of Atreus.
 No I must find some better way entirely— 470
 An enterprise which will prove to my old father
 That the son of his loins is not by breed a weakling.
 It's a contemptible thing to want to live forever
 When a man's life gives him no relief from trouble.
 What joy is there in a long file of days,
 Edging you forward toward the goal of death,
 Then back again a little? I wouldn't give much for a man
 Who warms himself with the comfort of vain hopes.
 Let a man nobly live or nobly die
 If he is a nobleman: I have said what I had to say 480

Chorus

Ajax, no one could ever call those words
 Spurious or alien to you. They are your own heart's speech
 Pause, though, a moment; put aside these thoughts;
 And give your friends a chance to win you over.

Tecmessa

Ajax, my master, life knows no harder thing
 Than to be at the mercy of compelling fortune.
 I, for example, was born of a free father;
 If any man in Phrygia was lordly and prosperous, he was.
 Now I'm a slave Such, it seems, was the gods' will,
 And the will of your strong hand. But since I've come 490
 To share your bed with you, my thoughts are loyal
 To you and yours And I beg you
 In the holy name of Zeus who guards your hearth-fire,
 And by your bed, in which you have known peace with me,
 Don't give me up to hear the harsh speech

Of your enemies and bow to it, their bondslave.
 For this is certain: the day you die
 And by your death desert me, that same day
 Will see me outraged too, forcibly dragged
 By the Greeks, together with your boy, to lead a slave's life.
 And then some one of the lord class, 500
 With a lashing word, will make his hateful comment:
 "There she is, Ajax' woman;
 He was the greatest man in the whole army.
 How enviable her life was then, and now how slavish!"
 Some speech in that style. And my ill fate
 Will be driving me before it, but these words
 Will be a reproach to you and all your race.
 Ajax, revere your father; do not leave him
 In the misery of his old age—and your mother,
 Shareholder in many years, revere her too!
 She prays the gods for your safe return, how often!
 And last, dear lord, show pity to your child. 510
 Robbed of his infant nurture, reft of you,
 To live his life out under the rule of guardians
 Not kind nor kindred—what a wretchedness
 You by your death will deal to him and me!
 And I no longer have anywhere to look for help,
 If not to you. My country was destroyed
 Utterly by your spear, and another fate
 Brought down my mother and my father too,
 To dwell in death with Hades. Then what fatherland
 Shall I ever have but you? Or what prosperity?
 You are my only safety. O my lord,
 Remember even me. A man ought to remember 520
 If he has experienced any gentle thing.
 Kindness it is that brings forth kindness always.
 But when a man forgets good done to him
 And the recollection of it slips away,
 How shall I any longer call him noble?

Chorus

Ajax, I wish you could have pity in your heart
As I do For then you might approve her words.

Ajax

Well, she can certainly count on my approval
If only she sets her mind to do as I bid her.

Tecmessa

Dearest Ajax, I will be all obedience.

Ajax

Then bring me my child and let me see him.

530

Tecmessa

It was only because of my fears that I removed him

Ajax

In all this terrible business? Or do I understand you?

Tecmessa

For fear the poor little one might come in your way and be killed.

Ajax

Yes, that would have been worthy of my evil genius

Tecmessa

At all events I took care that it shouldn't happen.

Ajax

You did well and deserve credit for your foresight

Tecmessa

Is there anything, then, you want me to do for you?

Ajax

Yes. Let me speak to my boy and see his face.

Tecmessa

He's not far off The servants are looking after him.

Ajax

Why doesn't he come at once, then?

540

Tecmessa

Eurysaces! Your father is calling for you.

(To one of the servants inside.)

You bring him! you have him by the hand.

Ajax

Is he coming? Doesn't he hear your words?

*(Enter, from the side door, a servant leading
Eurysaces by the hand.)*

Tecmessa

Here he is. See, the servant's bringing him.

Ajax

Lift him up, lift him to me He won't be frightened,

Even by seeing this fresh-butchered gore,

Not if he really is my son Break in

The colt straight off to his father's rugged ways,

Train him to have a nature like his sire.

My boy, have better luck than your father had,

550

Be like him in all else; and you will not be base.

You know, even now I somewhat envy you:

You have no sense of all this misery.

Not knowing anything's the sweetest life—

Ignorance is an evil free from pain—

Till the time comes when you learn of joy and grief.

And when you come to that,

Then you must show your father's enemies

What sort of a man you are, and what man's son.

Till then feed on light breezes, basking

In the tenderness of your young life, giving your mother joy.

For rest assured, the Greeks will not offer you outrage

560

Or hatefully insult you, even when we are parted.

I leave you a strong warden at the door,

Teucer He will protect and rear you up

And stint you nothing, even though now he's far away,

Gone on a distant raid in enemy country.

—You, men at arms and seafarers, my followers,

I enjoin this act of kindness on you all:

Pass on my command to Teucer, bid him take
My boy here to my home, present him
To Telamon and my mother, Eriboea,
And let him tend and nourish their old age
With constancy, till at the last they find
Their dark apartments with the god below.
As for my arms—

570

I say no arbiter of the Greeks shall set them
As a prize of competition for the army,
Certainly my destroyer shall not. Rather
You, my boy, take from me this great weapon
From which you have your name, Eurysaces;
Hold and direct it by its stalwart strap,
This sevenfold-oxhide-thick unbreachable shield.
The rest of my armor shall be buried with me.
But there's enough Come, take the child quickly;
Close up the house And let there be no wailing
Here out of doors Lord, what a plaintive creature
Womankind is! (*He goes inside*) Make fast, and hurry!
No good physician quavers incantations
When the malady he's treating needs the knife.

580

Chorus

I'm terrified by your eager urgency,
And take no comfort in your whetted tongue.

Tecmessa

Ajax, my lord, what is your mind bent upon?

Ajax

Don't probe and question! It becomes you to submit.

Tecmessa

How my heart falters! Ajax, by your child
And by the gods I beg you, don't be our betrayer!

Ajax

You're growing tedious Don't you know by now
That I owe the gods no service any more?

590

messa

What impious words!

ix

Reprove those who hear you.

cmessa

And will you not relent?

ax

You've said too much already.

cmessa

My lord, it is my fear that speaks!

jax (to the servants)

Shut the doors at once!

ecmessa

In the gods' name, soften!

ijax

You have a foolish thought

If you think at this late date to school my nature.

*(The doors are shut; Tecmessa remains quietly crouching
or kneeling beside them. A servant stands behind her,
holding Eurysaces by the hand)*

Chorus

Strophe

O splendid Salamis, my heart recalls,
Blest island, where you lie
At peace in the surf's pounding,
Radiant in all men's sight and prized forever
But Time has grown old since I
Have kept this wretched bivouac under Ida,
Losing count of the months' lapse,
Feeling the slow abrasion;
And dark is my thought's forecast:
Shall I win, shall I yet come, shall my coming be
To the somber and detested house of Death?

600

Antistrophe

And now wretchedly I must face
A new bout, for Ajax, ill to cure, 610
Sits by, and holy madness is his consort.
You sent him forth, fair island, in a time long past,
A warrior brilliant among warriors Now
He keeps his thoughts' flock in loneliness
And grieves his friends.
And the works of war that once his strong hands did
Are fallen, fallen,
Undear, unfriended by the friendless kings. 620

Strophe

I think, too,
Of his mother, with the white of age upon her:
Surely when the news of his mind's ravage
Is brought to her (O lamentable! lamentable!)
Not like the poor lorn nightingale
In a low sob will she utter her heart's anguish,
But high, rending strains will break from her, 630
The breast be beaten, and the tresses torn.

Antistrophe

Better if he
Were hidden in Hades, now his mind is gone;
For though his proud lineage
Excelled his warlike peers,
He keeps no more the steady heart we knew,
But ranges in extravagant madness Wretched father! 640
What a hard word you must hear! Calamity
Fallen upon your son, such as no other
Of all his race has borne, but only he.

(Enter Ajax from the tent with a sword in his hand.)

Ajax

Strangely the long and countless drift of time
Brings all things forth from darkness into light,
Then covers them once more. Nothing so marvelous

That man can say it surely will not be—
 Strong oath and iron intent come crashing down.
 My mood, which just before was strong and rigid, 650
 No dipped sword more so, now has lost its edge—
 My speech is womanish for this woman's sake;
 And pity touches me for wife and child,
 Widowed and lost among my enemies.
 But now I'm going to the bathing place
 And meadows by the sea, to cleanse my stains,
 In hope the goddess' wrath may pass from me
 And when I've found a place that's quite deserted,
 I'll dig in the ground, and hide this sword of mine,
 Hatefulest of weapons, out of sight May Darkness
 And Hades, God of Death, hold it in their safe keeping. 660
 For never, since I took it as a gift
 Which Hector, my great enemy, gave to me,
 Have I known any kindness from the Greeks
 I think the ancient proverb speaks the truth:
 An enemy's gift is ruinous and no gift.
 Well, then,
 From now on this will be my rule: Give way
 To Heaven, and bow before the sons of Atreus.
 They are our rulers, they must be obeyed.
 I must give way, as all dread strengths give way,
 In turn and deference. Winter's hard-packed snow
 Cedes to the fruitful summer; stubborn night 670
 At last removes, for day's white steeds to shine.
 The dread blast of the gale slackens and gives
 Peace to the sounding sea; and Sleep, strong jailer,
 In time yields up his captive. Shall not I
 Learn place and wisdom? Have I not learned this,
 Only so much to hate my enemy
 As though he might again become my friend,
 And so much good to wish to do my friend, 680
 As knowing he may yet become my foe?
 Most men have found friendship a treacherous harbor.

Enough: this will be well

You, my wife, go in
And fervently and continually pray the gods
To grant fulfilment of my soul's desire.
And you, my friends, heed my instructions too,
And when he comes, deliver this to Teucer:
Let him take care for me and thought for you
Now I am going where my way must go,
Do as I bid you, and you yet may hear
That I, though wretched now, have found my safety

690

(Ajax goes out through the wing; Tecmessa
and Eurysaces go into the tent)

Chorus

Strophe

I shudder and thrill with joy,
I leap and take wings—Lord Pan!
Come to me over the sea
From your huge, snow-buffeted mountain,
From the long, harsh ridge of Cyllênê
I would dance, I am bent upon dancing!
Teach me (you are the gods' teacher
And yourself you need no teacher)
Wild, high, excited dances, Mysian, Cnosian—
I would dance, I am bent upon dancing!
And over the open sea
Come to me in the clear light,
Apollo, Lord of Delos—
Be with me in kindness always.

700

Antistrophe

The harsh god has taken
His siege of grief from our eyes.
(I exult with love and with joy!)

Once again, Zeus,
King of the bright air, your perfect daylight
May bathe our skimming seacraft in its whiteness.

Ajax forgets his pain,
And now, with holy rite and due observance,
Once more knows reverent thoughts.
Great Time makes all things dim,
And nothing seems beyond the verge of speech,
Since Ajax has resolved
(Amazing!) his heart's fierceness and his stern
Strife with the sons of Atreus.

710

(Enter a Messenger.)

Messenger

Friends, I would deliver this news first to you:
Teucer has just come back from rugged Mysia
No sooner did he reach headquarters than
The whole Greek army gathered to abuse him.
They'd seen him coming quite a long way off
And, when he arrived, stood around him in a circle,
Jabbing at him with jeers from every side
Called him the brother of a lunatic
And traitor to the army; threatened him
With stoning to a torn and bloody death.
So far they went that eager fingers then
Had plucked forth swords from scabbards, but the thing,
Just as it hurried toward its uttermost,
Grew quiet at the elders' peaceful words
But where is Ajax? I must speak my charge,
And cannot do it but to my lord himself.

720

730

Chorus

He is not here He went away just now;
His heart is changed, and bends to bear the yoke
Of a changed purpose.

Messenger

May God help him then!
Perhaps the man that sent me was too slow
In sending, or I lingered on the way

Chorus

What is so urgent? Why do you think you're late?

740

Messenger

Teucer declared the man should not go out,
But stay indoors, till he himself arrives.

Chorus

He *has* gone out, though—seeking his truest good.
He wants to be relieved of the gods' anger.

Messenger

A very foolish and misguided thought,
If Calchas can foresee events at all!

Chorus

What are you saying? What can you know of it?

Messenger

This much I know—I happened to be near:
For Calchas rose and left the kingly circle
And came to speak with Teucer privately
Without the Atridae; gently he placed his hand
In Teucer's own, and urged and pled with him
To use all shifts to keep his brother safe
Under his tent-roof, and confine him there
Throughout the length of this now present day,
If ever he wished to see him alive again.
Only for this one day, the prophet said,
Will the Goddess Athena vex him with her anger.

750

“Wherever men forget their mere man's nature,
Thinking a thought too high, they have no use
Of their huge bulk and boldness, but they fall
On most untoward disasters sent by Heaven.
Ajax, even when he first set out from home,
Proved himself foolish, when his father gave him
His good advice at parting. ‘Child,’ he said,
‘Resolve to win, but always with God's help.’
But Ajax answered with a senseless boast:
‘Father, with God's help even a worthless man
Could triumph. I propose, without that help,
To win my prize of fame.’ In such a spirit

760

He boasted And when once Athena stood
 Beside him in the fight, urging him on
 To strike the enemy with his deadly hand,
 He answered then, that second time, with words
 To shudder at, not speak: 'Goddess,' he said,
 'Go stand beside the other Greeks, help them.
 For where I bide, no enemy will break through '
 These were the graceless words which won for him
 The goddess' wrath, they kept no human measure.
 But if he lives this day out, then perhaps,
 With God's help, we may be his saviors still "

This was the seer's message. Teucer rose
 At once and sent me off, bearing you these
 Instructions, with strict charge to keep them But
 If Ajax has deprived me of my hope,
 His life is done. Else Calchas has no art.

770

780

Chorus

Tecmessa, I think you were born for every misery.
 Come and attend to this man's fearful story.

(As though to himself.)

The razor grazes near, and I feel no comfort.

(Enter Tecmessa, carrying Eurysaces.)

Tecmessa

I have only just found respite from that other
 Siege of calamities. What new alarm is this?

Chorus

Listen to the message this man has brought.
 It concerns Ajax, and it sounds grim.

790

Tecmessa

Alas, what is your message? Not that we're ruined?

Messenger

As to your own case, I can't say. But if Ajax
 Has left his tent, there is not much hope for him.

Tecmessa

But he *has* gone out. I tremble in suspense
To know your meaning.

Messenger

Teucer sends strict directions that Ajax
Must be kept under the cover of his tent
And not permitted to go out alone.

Tecmessa

But where *is* Teucer? And why does he say this?

Messenger

He has just returned. And he apprehends
That Ajax' going out will be his ruin.

Tecmessa

Heaven help us! Who was the man that told him this?

800

Messenger

Calchas the prophet. He warned us to be on our guard
All day, for it brings him either life or death.

Tecmessa

Alas, friends, stand between me and my doom!
Hurry, some of you, and bring Teucer quickly;
The rest divide—let one group search the eastward
And one the westward bendings of the shore,
To trace his dangerous path. I can see now
That I have been beguiled of his intent
And exiled from his kindness which I knew.
But oh! my child, what shall I do? Not stay,
But join the search as far as my strength supports me
Come, let's be at the work! No time to linger,
If we aim to save a man that's bent on death.

810

Chorus

I am ready. More than my words shall show it.
You'll find me swift of foot and prompt in action.

(Tecmessa leaves Eurysaces with the attendants and goes hurriedly out. Meanwhile, the Chorus divides into two equal semichoruses and exits through the side entrances)

SCENE: *An empty place by the seashore. No scenery need be indicated except some bushes, behind which Ajax' body will fall. His preparations, though, should be largely visible to the audience Enter Ajax.*

Ajax (carefully fixes the sword in place, tamps down the ground, and feels the edge of the blade)

He's firm in the ground, my Slayer. And his cut
 (If I have time even for this reflection)
 Should now be deadliest. For, first, the sword
 Was Hector's gift, a token of guest-friendship,
 And he of all guest-friends my bitterest foe;
 Here, too, it stands, lodged in this hostile ground
 Of Troy, its edge made new with iron-devouring stone.
 And, last, I've propped it, so, with careful handling,
 To help me soon and kindly to my death.
 This preparation I have made. And now,
 Making my invocation, as is right,
 I call first, Zeus, on you. Grant me a little thing:
 Rouse up some messenger for me, to bear
 The news of my disaster first to Teucer,
 So that he first may gently lift me up
 When I have fallen on this reeking sword.
 I would not have some enemy spy me out
 And cast me forth, a prize for birds and dogs.
 Grant me, O Zeus, this one thing. And do you,
 Hermes, Conductor to the Nether World,
 Waft me with one swift unconvulsive leap
 Upon this piercing blade. And you, Dread Furies—
 You who are ever maidens and do watch
 Above all fates and sufferings of men—

820

830

Come with long strides, my helpers, mark my end,
 How Atreus' sons have brought me to my ruin,
 And sweep upon them for their ruin too.
 They see me falling now by my own hand, 840
 So too by loved and kindred hand may they!
 Go, swift and punishing Erinyes,
 Taste the whole army's blood, and spare them nothing.
 And you that drive your chariot up the steep
 Of Heaven, Lord Helios—when you next shall see
 My own dear country, check your golden reins,
 And bring the tale of my distressful death
 To my old father and to her that nursed me.
 Poor mother! When she hears this wretched word, 850
 How her grief's note will quaver through the town!
 But I must leave this idle vein of weeping
 And set about my business with some speed.
 Strong God of Death, attend me now and come.
 And yet I shall converse with you hereafter
 And know you in the world below. But you,
 Sweet gleam of daylight now before my eyes,
 And Sun-God, splendid charioteer, I greet you
 For this last time and never any more.
 O radiance, O my home and hallowed ground
 Of Salamis, and my father's hearth, farewell! 860
 And glorious Athens, and my peers and kin
 Nurtured with me, and here all springs and streams,
 My nurses, you that wet the plains of Troy,
 Farewell! This last word Ajax gives to you;
 The rest he keeps, to speak among the dead.

*(He falls on the sword and collapses behind the bushes.
 Enter, from one wing, the first of the two divisions
 of the Chorus)*

First Semichorus

Toil breeds toil upon toil,
 Where, where have I not searched?

No place knows that I share its secret.

Listen! What noise was that?

870

*(Enter, from the other wing, the other division
of the Chorus.)*

Second Semichorus

Only us, your shipmates.

First Semichorus

What luck?

Second Semichorus

From the ships to westward we've scanned all the ground.

First Semichorus

And discovered . . . ?

Second Semichorus

Labor enough; no trace of him we seek.

First Semichorus

Nor yet on the path to eastward, facing the sunrise:

No sign of him at all.

(The two halves of the Chorus unite.)

Chorus

What struggling fisherman

Of those that seek their haul

With labor in the hours of sleep;

880

What nymph of mountain side

Or seaward-rolling river

Might see the grim man

Wandering somewhere and cry out to me?

I wish one would! For surely

It's a hard thing that I must range and plod,

With never a fair course

To bring me near my goal;

But I cannot see the afflicted man's faint trace.

890

*(Tecmessa has entered from the wing and reached the
place where Ajax has fallen. She is still invisible,
though, being masked by the bushes.)*

Tecmessa

Oh! No! No!

Chorus

Whose is that harsh cry bursting from the copse?

Tecmessa

Oh! Oh!

Chorus

It is she, I see her now, the poor captive wife,
Tecmessa. She is lost in lamentation

Tecmessa

Friends, I am ruined, overwhelmed, undone.

Chorus

What is the matter?

Tecmessa

Here at my feet lies Ajax, newly slain
His fallen body enfolds and hides the sword.

Chorus

Oh, now I shall not win home!
You have dealt me death, my lord,
Your poor unhappy shipmate
—And I feel for her, poor wretched one, poor wife!

900

Tecmessa

He is dead, dead We can only weep for him.

Chorus

Whose hand helped him to his fate?

Tecmessa

His own hand and act It's plain to see.
This blade, packed in the ground,
On which he fell, declares it.

Chorus

How blind I was! And you bled alone, your friends not guarding!
I was all deaf and stupid, totally heedless.

910

Let me see him,
Rugged and ill-starred Ajax, where he lies.

Tecmessa

You *must* not see him! I will cover him
With this enfolding garment from all sight

*(She removes her own mantle, which should be ample
and rectangular, and covers him.)*

Surely no one who loved him could endure
To see the foam at his nostrils and the spout
Of darkening blood from the wound his own hand made.
Alas, what shall I do? Which of your friends
Will bear you up? Where's Teucer? Oh, may he come in time
To give fit tendance to his fallen brother!
Ajax! To be so great, and suffer this!
Even your enemies, I think, might weep for you.

920

Chorus

You were bound, hard spirit,
Bound in the end (it is clear now)
To work the term of your luckless
Life's share of affliction, that vast journey.
What could they mean but that,
The groans your fierce heart uttered
By night and in the sunlight,
Fraught with hate
For the sons of Atreus,
Fraught with a mind for harm?
That time was to be a great
Inaugural time of sorrows
When the strife was set for soldiership
Over the priceless armor.

930

Tecmessa

Oh! The pain of it!

Chorus

A noble grief, I know, goes to the heart.

Tecmessa

Oh! Oh!

Chorus

I don't wonder, lady,
That you cry out, and again cry out, your grief,
Deprived so recently of one so dear.

940

Tecmessa

You may conjecture that;
I know and feel it all too certainly.

Chorus

That is true.

Tecmessa

Poor little one! What a yoke of servitude
We go to! What hard taskmasters!

Chorus

They are ruthless indeed, the two sons of Atreus,
If they do the unspeakable thing
You have spoken in your distress:
God forbid!

Tecmessa

Even in what we suffer I see the gods' hand.

950

Chorus

Yes, they have given an overload of grief.

Tecmessa

I think Pallas, the dreadful goddess, has bred
This pain, perhaps for her favorite, Odysseus.

Chorus

That waiting, laboring man,
How he insults in his black heart!
He mocks our madding griefs
With loud laughter, bitter to bear,
And the twin kings hear and join him

960

Tecmessa

Well, let them laugh their laughter and exult
In Ajax' downfall They didn't want him living;
Perhaps, now he is dead, they will yearn for him,
When the fighting presses. Ignorant men
Don't know what good they hold in their hands until
They've flung it away. His death was a bitterer thing to me
Than sweet to them, but for himself a happiness.
For he won his great desire, the death he looked for.
Why should those others mock him any more?
His death concerns the gods, not them at all.
Let Odysseus think of this and make his empty insult.
For them there is no Ajax; mine is gone,
But not the grief and loss he leaves to me.

970

(Teucer is heard in the wing)

Teucer

O God! God!

Chorus

Hush! For I think it's Teucer's voice I hear,
And his cry goes straight to the mark of this disaster.

(Teucer enters.)

Teucer

O my dear brother Ajax, have you come
To grief, as this strong rumor says you have?

Chorus

He is dead, Teucer Know the simple truth.

Teucer

Then my ill-luck is bearing heavily down!

980

Chorus

It is true.

Teucer

Miserable!

Chorus

You may well groan.

Teucer

Rash and calamitous!

Chorus

Yes, Teucer.

Teucer

The grief comes sharp. But where
Is the little one? Where in the whole width
Of Troyland shall I look for him?

Chorus

He is alone

By the tents.

Teucer (to Tecmessa)

Go quickly, then,
Quickly, and bring him here. Some enemy else
May snatch him, as one would a lion-whelp
Torn from its mother. Hurry and lose no time!
When a man lies dead and cannot help himself,
The world delights to mock and injure him.

(Exit Tecmessa.)

Chorus

Teucer, that was his last command to you,
To take care for his child, as you are doing.

990

Teucer

This sight of all sights that my eyes have seen
To me is harshest, and no other road,
Of all my feet have taken, so has grieved
My soul as this, dear Ajax, which I took
In haste to seek the truth and trace it home
When first I heard the news of your disaster.
It was sharp news, and sped through all the army
As if some God had sent it: you were dead.
And when I heard it, still a long way off,

1000

I groaned with inward misery, now I see,
It is true, and it destroys me.

Ah, me!

Come and uncover, let me see the worst

(He uncovers the face of Ajax.)

Hard, bitter countenance, lines of fierce resolve,

How can I look at you? Oh, what a crop

Of anguish you have sown for me in death!

Where can I go? Who ever will receive me,

Now I have failed to help you in your need?

Old Telamon is your father, and mine too:

No doubt he'll welcome me and beam on me

When I come home without you Very likely!

1010

He's not much given to smiling, even when things go well

What will he not say? What reproach will he spare me?

Bastard and gotten by the war-spear, coward,

Nerveless deserter and abandoner—

Of you, dear Ajax! or perhaps suggest

I did it out of treachery, so that I

Might get your house and kingship by your death.

These will be that harsh old man's reproaches:

Age makes him morose and stirs him up

To causeless anger. In the end I'll be

Cast into exile and denied my country,

A slave in his account and not a freeman.

1020

At home those are my expectations; here in Troy

My enemies are numerous, my help small

Such are the benefits your death has brought me.

What shall I do? How shall I disengage you,

Brother, from off this bitter, gleaming spike,

Your murderer, by whose cut you gasped your life out?

Do you see how in time Hector, though dead,

Was to destroy you? Only consider this

Amazing thing, the fortunes of two men:

The girdle Hector had as Ajax' gift

Was that which dragged him from the chariot rails,

1030

Clamping his flesh and grating him until
He swooned in death, this sword Hector gave Ajax,
Who perished on it with a death-fraught fall.
Did not a Fury beat this weapon out?
And was it not Aidoneus, that grim craftsman,
Who made that other one? In my opinion,
This was the gods' contrivance, like all other
Destinies of men, for the gods weave them all;
But if anyone should find my thought at fault,
Let him keep his opinion, and I mine

Chorus

Cut short your speech, and quickly consider
How best to hide him in some sort of grave,
And what you must say next. I see a man
Coming, our enemy, to laugh, I think,
Like one who means us harm, at our misfortunes.

1040

Teucer

Which chief of the army is it that you see?

Chorus

Menelaus, the one we made this voyage to gratify.

Teucer

I see him now.
At closer range he's not hard to distinguish.

(Enter Menelaus, attended by two heralds.)

Menelaus

You, there! I tell you not to lift that corpse
Nor bury it, but leave it where it is

Teucer

And why the expense of this somewhat grand announcement?

Menelaus

My pleasure, and the High Command's decree.

1050

Teucer

Perhaps you'd care to give some justification for it.

Menelaus

Listen, then.

When we brought Ajax here from Greece,
 We thought he would be our ally and our friend:
 On trial we've found him worse than any Trojan—
 Plotting a murderous blow at the whole army,
 A night attack, to nail us with his spear.
 And unless some god had smothered that attempt,
 We should have met the end that he has met,
 Done to a helpless, miserable death,
 And he be living still But God changed
 His criminal heart to fall on sheep and cattle.
 Therefore I say, no man exists on earth
 Who shall have the power to give him burial,
 But he shall be tossed forth
 Somewhere on the pale sand, to feed the sea birds.
 There it is, and I want no fire-breathing.
 Maybe we couldn't rule him while he lived;
 But now he is dead, we most assuredly will,
 With a firm directing hand, whether you like it or not.
 So long as he lived, he never would heed our words,
 Never. And yet it's a poor common soldier
 That feels no duty to obey his betters.
 Laws will never be rightly kept in a city
 That knows no fear or reverence, and no army
 Without its shield of fear can be well governed.
 And even if a man rears a huge frame,
 He had better know how small a cause can throw him.
 When a man is moved by wholesome fear and shame,
 You may know that combination makes for safety;
 But insubordination and the rule
 Of do-as-you-like invariably, mark my words,
 Sooner or later drive a city on
 Before the gale into the sea's gulf.
 Enact, I say, some salutary fear:
 And let's not think we can do just what we please,

1060

1070

1080

And then, when we grow vexatious, pay no fees.
There's turnabout in these things A while ago
He was the hot aggressor; now it's I
Who entertain large ideas. And I give you notice,
Don't bury him. For you may find, if you do,
That you're apt to take a tombward fall yourself.

1090

Chorus

Menelaus, these are fine principles you've upreared;
Don't shame them now by outrage to the dead

Teucer

Friends, I never shall be amazed again
To see a man of humble birth go wrong,
When those who claim the noblest birth of all
Utter such wrongful speech as you've just heard.
Come, tell me again: you say you brought this man
Here for the Greeks as an ally *you* enlisted?
Didn't he make the voyage here on his own,
As his own master? How, then, are you his general?
What gives you title to command his people,
Who followed him from home? King of Sparta
You came, no general over us. You've no more claim
To marshal him than he has to drill you.
Why, you sailed here in a subordinate place,
Not lord of all, that you should ever claim
The right to captain Ajax! Rule your own;
Chastise their arrogant speech. But Ajax,
In spite of your prohibitions and your brother's,
I shall lay in his tomb, reverently and justly,
Regardless of your frowns. It wasn't at all
For your wife's sake he made the expedition,
Like some poor, toiling subject; but for the oaths
Which he had sworn—no service due to you
He took no stock of nobodies. Think this over,
And come then with more heralds at your back,

1100

1110

And maybe the general too. But I'll take no notice
Of your pother, so long as you're what you are.

Chorus

I can't approve such bold speech in misfortune;
Harsh words, however just they are, still rankle.

Menelaus

This bowman seems to think quite well of himself

1120

Teucer

My archery is no contemptible science.

Menelaus

Think how he'd boast if he wore a warrior's armor!

Teucer

I'm a match light-armed for you in bronze, I think.

Menelaus

That tongue of yours! What a fierce heart it fosters!

Teucer

A man may have some boldness in the right

Menelaus

So! It was right he should kill me and then prosper!

Teucer

Kill? Truly *this* is a miracle,
If you've been killed and still are living!

Menelaus

A god saved me, I was dead in *his* intention.

Teucer

Well, don't affront the gods, if the gods have saved you.

Menelaus

Could it be that I should fail to revere the gods' laws?

1130

Teucer

Yes, if you intervene
To interrupt the burial of the dead.

Menelaus

Of my own enemies! *They* must not be buried.

Teucer

Ajax opposed you, then, on the field of battle?

Menelaus

He hated me, as I did him. You knew that well.

Teucer

There was some reason for it:

You were found out procuring fraudulent votes.

Menelaus

Charge his defeat to the judges, not to me.

Teucer

You have a gift for suave and stealthy villainy.

Menelaus

Someone is going to smart for that speech.

Teucer

No worse, I judge, than the smart I shall inflict.

Menelaus

I tell you just one thing This man must not be buried.

1140

Teucer

And this shall be your answer. He shall be
Buried at once.

Menelaus

I observed a man once of fast and saucy speech
Who had pressed sailors to make a voyage in a storm;
When the weather got really rough, you couldn't hear
Him piping anywhere: he hid himself in his cloak,
And anybody aboard could step on him at will.
And very possibly you and your reckless speech—
If a big whistling storm should suddenly come
Out of a little cloud—your clamorous uproar
Might be quenched in a very similar fashion.

Teucer

And I once saw a man inflated with foolishness,
Who insulted the misfortunes of his neighbors.
And another man, closely resembling me,

1150

Quite like me in temperament, gave him a straight look
 And said to him, "Man, don't outrage the dead.
 You certainly shall regret it if you do."
 That was the advice he gave that worthless man.
 I see him now, and he is, it seems to me,
 You, and nobody else. Am I speaking in riddles?

Menelaus

I'm leaving. I shall only look absurd
 To stay and chide you, when I might use force.

1160

(Exit.)

Teucer

Go, then. It does me little credit, either,
 To listen to an empty man's loud talk.

Chorus

A great and wrathful contest is shaping.
 Teucer, bestir yourself. Find him,
 As quickly as you can, some hollow
 Cavity in the earth, that shall become
 His dank, capacious tomb, a signal
 Reminder of him to men in after time.

Teucer

Here, just in time for that, his wife and child
 Are coming, to perform with kindred touch
 The service due his pitiable body.

1170

(Enter Tecmessa with Eurysaces.)

Come, little one, kneel down, as suppliants do,
 Grasp your father, the creator of your life.
 Hold in your hands this lock of mine

(Cuts it, and puts it in the boy's hand.)
 and hers,

(Cuts it, etc.)

And this, a third, your own

*(Puts his hand on the boy's head and separates the lock
 in readiness to cut it.)*

—a suppliant's treasure
Keep your station, and make your supplication.
And if anyone in the army tries to wrest you
Forcibly from this corpse, may his corpse be
Thrown out unburied from his land and home,
Wretchedly, as he is a wretch, cut off
At the root with all his race, even as I
Have cut this lock of hair.

(*Cuts it and gives it to Eurysaces.*)

Take it, dear child, and guard it, and let no one
Remove you, but cling fast, inclining over him.

1180

(*To the Chorus*)

And you, don't huddle near like a crowd of women,
Instead of the men you are, but rally round
And help, till I come back, having provided
A tomb for him, though all the world gainsay me

(*Exit Teucer*)

Chorus

Strophe

Which year, I wonder, shall be my long toil's last,
And when shall the battered count of them all be full?
They bring upon me a ceaseless curse of spear-spied
Trouble over the length and breadth of Troy,
A grief and a shame to all Greek men.

1190

Antistrophe

Whoever it was that first revealed to Hellas
Their common scourge, detested arms and war,
I curse him. Would the large air first had taken him
Or else the impartial house of Death. Generations
Of toil be made for us. Ah,
There indeed was a harrier of men!

Strophe

It was he that denied my share
In the sweet companionship

1200

Of garland and deep cup;
 And miserly he grudged me
 The flute's soft lovely clamor
 And a pleasant bed in the night,
 And love, love he abridged and interdicted.
 Ah, me! I languish, so None cares
 That my locks are damp with the thick continual dew
 Which is all my thought of Troy.

1210

Antistrophe

And he, valorous Ajax,
 Who was once my ward and cover
 From every flying shaft
 And dread in the hours of night,
 Now is handed over to his harsh daemon
 What joy, then, is left to me?
 Oh, if somehow I might find myself
 Rounding a wood-topped bulwark of the sea,
 Sunium's level tip where the surf washes,
 And make my salutation
 To holy Athens!

1220

(*Enter Teucer hastily.*)

Teucer

I hurried back when I saw the commander-in-chief,
 Agamemnon, approaching. And here he is;
 I think he will give his hateful lips full freedom.

(*Enter Agamemnon with retinue*)

Agamemnon

You, there! Are you the one they tell me of,
 Who has made bold to yawp these powerful speeches,
 Unpunished, so far, against me? You,
 The son of a captive slave-woman! What if your mother
 Had been a princess? *Then* I think you'd strut,
 Then you'd talk big! Why, as it is, being
 Nothing yourself, you have risen up to protect
 That man who now is nothing, and have sworn
 That I am not the general nor the admiral

1230

Either of the Achaeans or of you,
 Since Ajax, as you say, came under his own command!
 These are quite some taunts to hear from a slave.
 And what is the man on whose behalf you've bawled
 These very ambitious claims? Where did he go,
 Or stand in battle, where I did not too?
 Was he the one real man in the whole Greek army? 1240
 Ah! that contest for Achilles' armor!
 We shall regret the day we published it
 If every moment we must be defamed
 And slandered by this Teucer, if you please!
 Who can't accept the court's majority verdict,
 Defeated as he is, or yield to it,
 No! but you losers pelt us still with slanders,
 And seek to wound us with your crafty plots.
 Yet where such reckless courses have their head,
 No law can stand unshaken, not when we
 Must shove the lawful victors from their place,
 And give precedence to the ranks behind.
 This must be curbed. It's not a man's great frame 1250
 Or breadth of shoulders makes his manhood count:
 A man of sense has always the advantage.
 A very little whip can serve to guide
 A hulking ox straight forward on his road.
 And I fancy something of that medicine
 Is coming for you, unless you get some sense!
 'That man is dead, now—just a shadow;
 And yet you seem to count on *him* to protect
 Your sauciness! I say, learn moderation!
 Think of your slave's birth; bring someone else, 1260
 A freeman, here to plead your case before me.
 I'm disinclined to hear more words from you,
 Being not much versed in your barbarian speech.

Chorus

I wish you both might learn a moderate mind!
 That is the best I have to say to you.

To drown among the fishes of the deep.
 These are your origins. Can you censure mine?
 Telamon was my father, and he won
 My mother as his valorous prize of war. 1300
 She was a princess by her birth, the child
 Of King Laomedon, and Heracles
 Distinguished her to be my father's gift.
 Two royal races gave me to the world.
 How shall I shame my kin if I defend them
 In their adversity, when you with shameless words
 Would fling them out unburied? Listen to this:
 If you should venture to cast Ajax out,
 You must cast out the three of us as well,
 Together in one heap with him. I make my choice
 To stand in public and to die for him, 1310
 Rather than for your wife—or was it your brother's wife?
 So! Think of your own case, and not merely mine;
 For if you vex me, you may wish you had been
 A coward, rather than too bold with me.

(Enter Odysseus.)

Chorus

You arrive, my lord Odysseus, just in time,
 If you have come to make not strife but peace.

Odysseus

What is this, gentlemen? For quite some distance
 I could hear the sons of Atreus raising their voices
 Over this valiant corpse.

Agamemnon

Indeed we were.
 Hadn't we just been hearing infamous language, 1320
 My lord Odysseus, from this fellow here?

Odysseus

What language do you complain of? If he gave
 Insult for insult, I could pardon him.

Agamemnon

I gave him ugly words:
It was an ugly wrong he offered me.

Odysseus

What did he do to injure you?

Agamemnon

He said

He would not leave that corpse unburied, but
Declared he'd bury it in spite of me.

Odysseus

Agamemnon, may a friend speak truth to you,
And still enjoy your friendship as before?

Agamemnon

Speak. I would be foolish to resent your words;
You are my truest friend in the whole army.

1330

Odysseus

Then listen. Don't cast out this brave man's body
Unburied; don't in the gods' name be so hard.
Vindictiveness should not so govern you
As to make you trample on the right. I too
Found this man hateful once, beyond the rest
Of all my fellow soldiers, since the time
I won Achilles' armor. Nevertheless,
In spite of his enmity, I cannot wish
To pay him with dishonor, or refuse
To recognize in him the bravest man
Of all that came to Troy, except Achilles.
It would be wrong to do him injury;
In acting so, you'd not be injuring him—
Rather the gods' laws. It's a foul thing to hurt
A valiant man in death, though he *was* your enemy.

1340

Agamemnon

Do you, Odysseus, take his part against me?

Odysseus

I do.

I hated him while it was fair to hate.

Agamemnon

But now he is dead,

Shouldn't you rightly trample on his corpse?

Odysseus

Forbear, my lord, to seek unworthy triumphs.

Agamemnon

Reverence doesn't come easily to a prince.

1350

Odysseus

Regard for a friend's advice is not so difficult

Agamemnon

A good man should defer to his superiors.

Odysseus

No more, now.

You win the victory when you yield to friends.

Agamemnon

Think what a man you're interceding for!

Odysseus

My enemy, it's true. But he was noble.

Agamemnon

Do you intend pity to a corpse you hate?

Odysseus

His greatness weighs more than my hate with me.

Agamemnon

Men who act so are changeable and unsteady.

Odysseus

Men's minds are given to change in hate and friendship.

Agamemnon

Do you, then, recommend such changeable friends?

1360

Odysseus

I cannot recommend a rigid spirit.

Agamemnon

You'll make me look a coward in this transaction.

Odysseus

Generous, though, as all the Greeks will say.

Agamemnon

You want me, then, to let this corpse be buried?

Odysseus

Yes. For I too shall come to that necessity.

Agamemnon

In everything, I see, men labor for themselves.

Odysseus

For whom should I rather labor than myself?

Agamemnon

Let this be called your doing, and not mine.

Odysseus

However you do it, you will deserve praise.

Agamemnon

Understand my position. I would do
This and much more at your request. But as for him,
Whether on earth or in the underworld,
I hate him. You may do whatever you wish.

1370

(Exit Agamemnon with his retinue.)

Chorus

Whoever fails to recognize your wisdom
And value it, Odysseus, is a fool.

Odysseus

And now I have a promise,
Teucer, to make to you. From now on, I
Shall be as much your friend as I was once
Your enemy; and I should like to join

In the burial of your dead—doing with you
That labor, and omitting none of it,
Which men should give the noblest of their fellows. 1380

Teucer

Noble Odysseus, I can only praise you.
How greatly you deceived my expectations!
For though you hated him worst of the Argives,
You alone came to help, and did not wish,
Because you lived, to outrage him in death
That wit-struck general did otherwise—
He and his noxious brother—and decreed
That Ajax' corpse should rot without a tomb.
Therefore, may Zeus who rules on high Olympus,
Remembering Furies, and avenging Justice 1390
Destroy them miserably, just as they
Sought to work outrage and abomination
On my dear brother's body. Son of Laertes,
I feel some hesitation at your offer
And fear I cannot let you touch the corpse:
That might offend the dead. But bear your part
In all the rest, and if you wish to bring
Any others of the army, they shall be welcome.
I'll see to all the rest. But you, Odysseus,
Are written in our hearts a nobleman.

Odysseus

I could have wished to help. 1400
But if your preference is otherwise,
I shall respect your wish and take my leave.

(Exit Odysseus.)

Teucer

Shoulder the work. Delay
Has grown too long already.
Some of you hurry and dig
The hollow trench; others
Set the tall cauldron

Amid the surrounding flames
To ready the holy bath;
And one troop bring from within the tent
His glorious suit of armor

Now you, my boy,
Take hold with your little strength
Upon your father's body,
And help in tenderness to lift him up;
For still the warm conduits
Spout forth his life's dark force.
Come now, come, everyone
That claims to be his friend,
Begin, proceed, and bear him up,
This man of perfect excellence—
No nobler one has ever been than he:
I speak of Ajax, while he lived.

1410

(The cortege forms.)

Chorus

What men have seen they know;
But what shall come hereafter
No man before the event can see,
Nor what end waits for him.

1420

(Exeunt, following the body.)

THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS

Translated and with an Introduction by
MICHAEL JAMESON



INTRODUCTION TO THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS

HERACLES was rarely the subject of tragedy, although the most popular hero of Greek mythology. In the theater he was more commonly seen in satyr plays and comedy, and, indeed, this is an indication of his great appeal: he was both god and man, hero and buffoon. At times he appeared as a rescuer to conclude a play in which he was not the central character (in Aeschylus' lost *Prometheus Unbound*, in Euripides' *Alcestis*, in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*), but he is not tragic at such times or in the triumphant accomplishment of his labors but at the moment of his solitary defeat. Sophocles and Euripides (in his *Heracles*) each took for his plot one of his two defeats, while ignoring the other—his agony in the poisoned shirt and his homicidal madness against his wife and children. It may be that a single, terrible defeat is necessary to the career of one who is Everyman on a heroic scale and that the poisoned shirt and the madness are "doublets," coming from different versions of his life, concerning two different wives who are only later combined into a single account. Modern research suggests that at least two heroes have merged to form the classical Heracles—the one from Tiryns, the other from Thebes.

Our play contains the first sure reference to Heracles' decision to be burned alive on the pyre, although two divergent traditions about his end are as early as Homer and Hesiod: the one, that, great as he was, even the son of Zeus had to die like any other man; the other, that, after battling Death in various guises, he wins immortality among the gods on Olympus. In later times this latter is the dominant version, and the pyre which destroys his mortal body is the means of his ascent, as in Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*. The story of the pyre cannot be original with Sophocles, for we see it on Attic vases beginning in the early part of the century, and it seems always to have been connected with his becoming a god. Why, then, does

Sophocles avoid all reference to the final resolution of the hero's agony? For Heracles here expects death, and there is not the slightest hint of apotheosis, although it is explicit in the poet's *Philoctetes*. To find an answer, we must see the place of the last scene in the play, assuming that it is an integral part of the whole and not a conventional appendage dictated by mythology.

At the beginning Deianira tells us: "Now he wins through to the end of all his labors / and now I am more than ever afraid" (ll. 36-37), and soon after she reports a prophecy to her son Hyllus: "It said that either he would come to his life's end / or have by now, and for the rest of his time, / a happy life, once he had carried out this task" (ll. 79-81). So the play begins with his wife's anxiety over Heracles' last labors, which will mean the "end" (*telos*) for him and for her, in all its ambiguity; and it is the working-out of this end through a series of revelations constantly coming closer to the full truth that is the action of the play. When Heracles realizes that his end has come and has added further strokes to complete his fate, he closes the action with the order that he be carried out to the pyre to be burned alive: "The true / respite from suffering is this—my final end" (ll. 1255-56). It is this, the discovery of the end of Heracles, that gives the play its unity; for clearly, as the action is not centered on a single character, it does not have the obvious unity of an *Oedipus the King*, nor can it be made into such a play by ignoring either Heracles or Deianira and regarding the remaining character as the true hero. The title we have, avoiding both the principals, should be a warning. And once we allow that the subject of the play is larger than the tragedy of either character and inextricably involves both, we cannot stop short of the total action; to see the play, for instance, as an exposition of the destructive power of love makes a mere "afterpiece" of the last scene, where Heracles learns the truth and acts upon it. Rather, this is the play's climax as well as its conclusion.

The movement of the play as a series of revelations is expressed in action and imagery and is underscored in language through the prominent use in the Greek of the root of *phainein* ("reveal") and of its synonyms and opposites (there is a similar emphasis on *telos*,

"end," and its derivatives). In imagery the contrast of the dark, secret, night-time, and deadly with the bright and clear, with sun, fire, and lightning, culminates in the black, dead enemies (the Hydra's poison, Nessus' gift) that defeat Heracles, and the fire with which in turn he will vanquish them and himself. In action, the expected appearance of Heracles, seemingly assured, is replaced by the silent mystery of Iole and the concealment of Lichas, which, when exposed, are followed by the secrecy of Deianira and of Nessus, revealed to Deianira by the sunlight on the tuft of wool, to the world by the altar fire at Cenaean; the full revelation of his end to Heracles and of his further decision coincides with a new discovery—the revelation of Hyllus' character as a son worthy of his father.

There is also revelation of the divine agency behind the events. Lichas calls his false story of why Heracles has been absent so long "a tale where it is seen Zeus did the work" (l. 251, *praktōr phanei*); later, when the truth is out, "that silent / handmaiden, Cyprian Aphrodite / is revealed; this is her work" (ll. 859-61, *phanera . . . ephanē praktōr*); but in the end, when all is seen to agree with Zeus's oracles, "there is / nothing here which is not Zeus" (ll. 1277-78). Through the oracles mentioned at the beginning and near the end, we see that the events leading up to Heracles' defeat are part of the external, inevitable pattern against which the suffering and the actions of the characters must be seen. What happens when Heracles understands this pattern, being in accord with it and yet beyond it, may be the most important part of the play. As far as the characters, or we, can see, the Gods do not care. The meaning and worth of men's actions are what they make of them. We may remember now that "Sophocles claimed he depicted men as they ought to be, Euripides as they are" (Aristotle *Poetics* xxv. 11). If Euripides' characters were closer to reality, Sophocles' own were larger than life, on a heroic scale. How do his characters here fit his own description?

Deianira is easily the more sympathetic character for the modern reader, and many have been tempted to read the play as her tragedy. We see in the beginning her early fear of marriage and of lust, symbolized for her by the monstrous Achelous and then by Nessus, strictly outside the action, they are kept before us by her own and the

chorus' reminiscence For the end of Heracles' toils means her husband at rest at home and the end of violence and fear. No sooner has all this been realized, as it seems, than violence and lust burst into her own house and her own bed. Here we first see her stature in her kindness and her restraint after she knows who Iole is, in her refusal to hurt or even blame her husband or the girl. (Throughout there may well be a contrast intended with Aeschylus' Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon*) She resorts to a love charm with reluctance and misgivings, for they were unbecoming a great lady and notoriously dangerous We feel that she was incredibly foolish to trust a gift from Nessus, and soon she thinks so too, and yet we may fail to appreciate how plausible is his magic: the blood of Nessus is to her vile and repulsive, no less so because of the vaguely apprehended effect of the Hydra's poison, but it is precisely from the vile and repulsive that the most potent magic comes. Furthermore, Nessus and the centaurs in general were an incarnation of the erotic (as his attempt on her confirms—the poet's taste seems to have suppressed a peculiarly appropriate ingredient of the charm found in the tradition, the centaur's semen) What better source for a love charm to turn back toward his wife the lust of Heracles, "all desire when the beast's / inducements, all dipped in persuasion, have melted him" (ll. 661-62)? When she is told of the deadly effect of the poison and is cursed by her son, she leaves without a word to justify herself and, re-enacting the central ritual of her life, she makes the bed of Heracles for the last time and kills herself upon it. "How could any woman bring her hands to this?" (l. 898) the Chorus asks, for this is not the hanging of Jocasta or Antigone but the more masculine self-destruction with the sword. A woman, ordinary in her devotion to her marriage and family, shows her extraordinary nobility and strength at the time of her utter disaster.

But, for the Greeks, Heracles has even more of the heroic properties. No man has done more or suffered more. This is not to say that he is likable or, in the sickness of his passion, admirable. Nonetheless, for Deianira and Hyllus, when they think of her losing such a husband, he is "the best of all men" (ll. 177, 811-12). There is no idea of his being punished for his immorality, nor is there any attempt to

soften the impact of his enormous faults. Everything about him is larger than life. When his violent lust is revealed, it is not treated as showing him to be any less of a hero but as evidence of the super-human power of the one foe that has overcome him. Love is seen as a sickness, and the poison, intended as a drug, a remedy, brings about another sickness that can be cured only by suicidal fire. "I ask you to be my healer, / the only physician who can cure my suffering," he begs his son (ll. 1208-9). But this last sickness, the working of the poison, is also conceived of as a beast, the last of all that he has faced (cf. ll. 987, 1009 f., 1028 ff., 1053 ff.), and in the poet's language the other beasts are linked together to form a composite enemy that gains its late revenge. In this play, Heracles is more the beast-slayer than the savior of mankind, and it is in this role that, before he knows the truth, he thinks to punish Deianira. There is no point in reproving him in his ignorance and his horrible pain for this desire. Is any other reaction conceivable for one who knows only what he knows, who is in his pain, and, most important, has led his life? "... alive / I punished the evil and I punish them in death" (ll. 1110-11). Nor need we reprove or gloss over his failure to forgive her when he knows she was innocent. The knowledge that the poison came from Nessus puts everything in a new light. Before, though he prayed for death, he had not, it would seem, admitted to himself that his end had come. Now he knows, and he turns to face it. His end is not to be avoided, but his agony remains, and he treats it as a sickness and as a beast. He had said that this "flowering of madness" was "inexorable" (*akēlēton*, l. 999, that is, "not to be charmed away"). "Is there any singer of spells, / any craftsman surgeon who can / exorcise this curse, but Zeus?" (ll. 1000-1002). Now, calmly, forcing his will on his son, he applies the measures he had called for in his delirium: the fire and the sword he had used in his purification, purging the earth of beasts (ll. 1013 ff.), he turns on himself, resuming the role he has played all his life.

One cannot doubt that the audience as a whole would have thought beyond to the apotheosis, but, by suppressing all mention of elevation to the Gods through fire and by not motivating the fire

through an oracle, the poet focuses attention on the thing chosen—the fire itself as destroying and purifying—and on the act of choosing. Heracles suffers and acts not with the promise of immortality but with the firm expectation of death, and it is this which gives meaning to his choice. The hero who has wept and wailed, shamefully vanquished by a woman and his dead enemies, returns to the attack, even as Oedipus puts out his eyes, Ajax yields, only to choose suicide, and Antigone, buried alive, kills herself. Heracles tells his “tough soul,” “. . . make an end / of this unwanted, welcome task” (ll. 1259 ff). He makes his end his own.

Appropriately, it is Hyllus who closes the play, for it is through him that we have felt the emotional impact of the long last scene—Heracles, however stunning his actions, is hardly enough like us now for sympathy. When Hyllus accused his mother, we wanted to cry out, “She did not mean to . . .” and almost at once, with her death, his contrition acknowledges, as it were, that we were right. Now the new blows are felt through our sympathy with him. He must restrain his half-crazed father in his ghastly agony, he must brave a murderous anger to tell him the truth, and he must burn, or all but burn, his father alive and marry the woman he thinks of as his parents’ murderer. The dramatic power of the scene needs no comment, but we should also see that thus he ends the chain of violent love by accepting a marriage that appalls him, assuming his father’s mantle where alone his father had not triumphed through courage and endurance.

Finally, what of Zeus and the Gods who have shown so little compassion in “all that’s happened, they / who are called our fathers, who begot us, / can look upon such suffering” (ll. 1266–69)? For Sophocles, in this play at least, the Gods are “the way things are”—the invincible power of love, the predicted and inevitable end; they form the immovable background to human suffering and heroism. The action of the play insists that this is so, that there is what we might call an “inhuman” design, but it is more concerned with what, this being so, Deianira, Heracles, and Hyllus do and suffer and with the way in which, whatever their weakness, they show how men ought to be.

The Date

The date of the play is not known. Internal evidence has led to widely different conclusions, but a comparison with certain features of Euripides' *Medea* (431 B.C.) and *Heracles* (420-419 B.C.?) seems to help in placing it in the twenties of the fifth century. The date is of interest primarily for the study of Sophocles' development and for possible relations with the work of Euripides. The play is utterly apolitical. It was, then, probably written after *Ajax* and *Antigone*, close to *Oedipus the King*, when the poet was past sixty, and with *Electra* (probably) and *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus* certainly still to come.

A Note on the Text

For the most part I have translated the text of A. C. Pearson ("Oxford Classical Texts" [Oxford, 1923]), at a few points I have agreed with R. C. Jebb (*The Trachiniae*, Part V of *Sophocles, The Plays and Fragments* [Cambridge, 1892]) as against Pearson, especially in lines 207, 328, 526, 660, 837, 905, 1084, 1186, and 1191, more rarely I have departed from the interpretation of a word or phrase preferred by Jebb in his commentary, especially in lines 35, 101, 216, 231, 250, 309, 886, and 1010. In lines 100-102 the "seanarrows" probably refer to the Bosphorus and Hellespont, the "twin continents" to Europe and Africa at the Pillars of Heracles (Gibraltar); this agrees with H. Lloyd-Jones, *Classical Quarterly*, XLVIII (1954), 91-92. Finally, with Wilamowitz, I add *τέλος* in line 528, and at line 857 I read Herwerden's *ἄ τ' ὀλεθρίαν* for *τότε θοάν*. I do not attempt any justification, since this is not the place and since, in any case, the choices have been much influenced by the exigencies of making a translation.

THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS

CHARACTERS

Deianira, Wife of Heracles

Nurse

Hyllus, Son of Heracles and Deianira

Chorus, Women of Trachis, Friends of Deianira

A Messenger

Lichas, Herald of Heracles

Captive Women of Oechalia, Including the Young Iole (all silent parts)

An Old Man

Heracles

Bearers and Attendants of Heracles (silent parts)

THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS

SCENE: *Trachis, before the house of Heracles and Deianira. Deianira and the Nurse enter from the house.*

Deianira

It was long ago that someone first said:
You cannot know a man's life before the man
has died, then only can you call it good or bad.
But I know mine before I've come to Death's house
and I can tell that mine is heavy and sorrowful. 5
While I still lived in Pleuron, with Oeneus my father,
I conceived an agonizing fear of marriage.
No other Aetolian woman ever felt such fear,
for my suitor was the river Achelôus,
who used to come to ask my father for my hand, 10
taking three forms—first, clearly a bull, and then
a serpent with shimmering coils, then a man's body
but a bull's face, and from his clump of beard
whole torrents of water splashed like a fountain.
I had to think this suitor would be my husband 15
and in my unhappiness I constantly prayed for death
before I should ever come to *his* marriage bed.

But, after a time, to my joy there came
the famous Heracles, son of Alcmena and Zeus.
In close combat with Achelôus, he won the contest 20
and set me free. I do not speak of the manner
of their struggles, for I do not know. Someone
who watched the spectacle unafraid could tell.
I sank down, overwhelmed with terror lest
my beauty should somehow bring me pain. Zeus of the contests 25
made the end good—if it has been good.

Chosen partner for the bed of Heracles,
 I nurse fear after fear, always worrying
 over him. I have a constant relay of troubles;
 some each night dispels—each night brings others on. 30
 We have had children now, whom he sees at times,
 like a farmer working an outlying field,
 who sees it only when he sows and when he reaps.
 This has been his life, that only brings him home
 to send him out again, to serve some man or other. 35

Now he wins through to the end of all his labors,
 and now I find I am more than ever afraid.
 Ever since he killed the mighty Iphitus,
 we, his family, live here in Trachis, a stranger's guests,
 forced to leave our home. But no one seems to know 40
 where Heracles himself can be. I only know
 he's gone and left with me a sharp pain for him.
 I am almost sure that he is in some trouble.
 It has not been a short time—first a year,
 by now still more, and there has been no word of him. 45
 Yes, this tablet he left behind makes me think
 it must surely be some terrible trouble. Often
 I pray the Gods I do not have it for my sorrow.

Nurse

Deianira, my mistress, many times before
 I have watched as you wept and sobbed, bewailing 50
 your absent Heracles, and I said nothing. But now
 I wonder—if it is proper that the free should learn
 from the thoughts of slaves and I give you advice—
 how is it that your family abounds with sons, and yet
 you send no one to inquire for your husband? 55
 Hyllus, especially, it would be natural to send
 if he is at all concerned for his father's safety.
 See, here he is, running to the house,
 so if what I have said seems of any value,
 you can use the boy and follow my advice. 60

(Hyllus enters from the wings.)

Deianira

O my child, my son, even the low-born throw
a lucky cast when they speak well. This woman is
a slave, but what she says is worthy of the free.

Hyllus

What is it she said? Tell me, Mother, if you may.

Deianira

With your father abroad so long, it does not
look well that you have made no inquiry for him. 65

Hyllus

But I know where he is, if I can believe what I hear.

Deianira

My child, have you heard in what country he stays?

Hyllus

All this past year, in all its length of time
they say he was in service to a Lydian woman. 70

Deianira

If he could really endure that, then anything
might be said of him.

Hyllus

He is free now, I hear.

Deianira

Then where is he now? Is he alive or dead?

Hyllus

They say he is in Euboea, where he campaigns against
the city of Eurytus, unless he is still preparing. 75

Deianira

Did you know, my child, that it was about
this very place he left me a true prophecy?

Hyllus

What prophecy, Mother? I knew nothing about this.

Deianira

It said that either he would come to his life's end
or have by now, and for the rest of his time, 80
a happy life, once he had carried out this task.
Child, his future lies in the balance. Surely, then,
you will go to help him, since we are only safe 83
if he can save himself. His ruin is ours. 85

Hyllus

I shall go, Mother, and had I known the contents
of this oracle before, I would have been there
long ago. As it was, my father's usual
good luck kept me from worrying and being too fearful.
Now that I know of it, I shall not stop until 90
I have learned the whole truth about his fate.

Deianira

Go now, my son. There is always some advantage
in learning good news, even if one learns it late.

*(Hyllus leaves by one of the side entrances; the Chorus
enters, speaking, by the other.)*

Chorus

Shimmering night as she lies despoiled brings you
to birth at dawn, lays you to bed ablaze— 95
O Sun, Sun! I beg you,
tell me of Alcmena's child.
Where, where is Heracles?
All afire with the brilliance of lightning, tell me!
—is he in the sea-narrows, 100
or does he rest against the twin
continents? Your sight is the strongest.
With longing in her heart for him, I learn
that Deianira, over whom men fought,
like some unhappy bird, 105
never lays to bed her longing,
her eyes tearless, but
nurses fear that well remembers her husband's

journey, worn upon her troubled
husbandless bed, miserable, 110
with expectation of misfortune.

As many waves under
the untiring south wind or north
may be seen on the wide
ocean coming on 115
and going by, so he, the descendant
of Cadmus is twisted, but on life's
next toilsome surge, as on the Cretan
deep, he will be elevated.
Some god always pulls him 120
safely back from the house of Death.

(The Chorus turns toward Deianira)

Therefore, I reprove you,
respectfully, but still
dissenting. You should not let
all expectation of good 125
be worn away. Nothing painless
has the all-accomplishing King
dispensed for mortal men. But
grief and joy come circling
to all, like the turning paths 130
of the Bear among the stars.

The shimmering night does not stay
for men, nor does calamity,
nor wealth, but swiftly they are gone,
and to another man it comes
to know joy and its loss. 135
Therefore, I bid even you, O Queen, always
hold fast to this knowledge in your expectations.
When has Zeus been so careless of his children? 140

(Deianira comes forward and speaks.)

Deianira

You are here, I suppose, because you have heard

of my suffering. May you never learn
 by your own suffering how my heart is torn.
 You do not know now. So the young thing
 grows in her own places; the heat of the sun-god 145
 does not confound her, nor does the rain, nor any wind.
 Pleasurably she enjoys an untroubled life
 until the time she is no longer called a maiden
 but woman, and takes her share of worry in the night,
 fearful for her husband or for her children. Then, 150
 by looking at her own experience, she comes
 to understand the troubles with which I am weighed down.
 Many sufferings have made me weep before.
 But I shall tell you of one unlike all the rest.
 When King Heracles set off from home on his 155
 last journey, he left an old tablet in the house,
 on which some signs had been inscribed. Never before
 could he bring himself to speak to me of this,
 though he went out to many contests; he used to go
 as if for some great achievement, not to die. 160
 This once, as though he were no longer living, he told me
 what property from our marriage I should take and how
 he wished the portions of ancestral land divided
 among the children, first fixing the time at three months
 after he had been away from here one year: 165
 then he would either die exactly at this time,
 or, by getting past this time limit, he would
 in the future live a life without grief.
 He said that this was fated by the Gods to be
 the final limit of the labors of Heracles, 170
 as once at Dodona he heard the ancient oak
 declare on the lips of the twin Doves, the priestesses.
 The period of their prediction exactly coincides
 with the present time, when all must come true;
 so that I leap up from pleasant sleep in fright, 175
 my friends, terrified to think that I may have to live
 deprived of the one man who is the finest of all.

Chorus

Peace—speak words of good omen. I see a man
with laurel on his head who comes to speak to you

*(A messenger enters from the side in a great hurry,
full of his important news.)*

Messenger

O Deianira, my mistress, I am the first messenger 180
to free you from your uncertainty You should know
that Alcmena's son lives and is victorious
and brings from battle first-fruits for the gods of the land.

Deianira

What did you say, old man? What are you telling me?

Messenger

Soon there shall come to your halls that most enviable man, 185
your husband, appearing in his conquering might

Deianira

Who told you this? Some townsman or a stranger?

Messenger

This is what Lichas, the herald, proclaims to many
in the meadow where the cattle pasture. I heard him
and rushed off, that, as the first to bring the news, I might 190
profit from your gratitude and gain your favor.

Deianira

Why is he not here himself if all is well?

Messenger

He is not free to move as he would like, lady.
Around him in a circle stand all the people of Malis
and question him He is not able to take a step. 195
Everyone is curious and wants to know all
and will not let him go until he's heard him to
his heart's content So though *he* does not want to, he stays
with those who want him. You will see him soon in person.

Deianira

O Zeus, master of the unharvested meadow of Oeta, 200
though it has been long, you have given us joy.

Cry out, O you women who are within the house
and you who are without—now that the unhopèd-for sunshine
of this news has risen high, we pluck its gladness

Chorus

Let there be joyous shouting for this house and jubilation
around the hearth by girls whose wedding is to come; and let the
clamor

of men among them go in chorus to honor Apollo,
who wears the fine quiver, our defender. Together
raise on high the paean, paean, O maidens,
and shout aloud the name of his sister,
Artemis Ortygia, deer-hunter, who holds the twin torches,
and of the nymphs our neighbors.

I take it up, I shall not
push the flute aside, you master of my heart.
See how it excites me—

Euoi!—
the ivy that lately set the bacchantes whirling in rivalry.
Oh, Oh, Paean! See, see, dear lady,
you are face to face with it now,
it is clear to look upon.

*(Enter Lichas, Heracles' envoy, followed by a group
of captive women, among them Iole.)*

Deianira

I do see the group that comes to us, dear women.
The sight did not slip past my sentinel eyes.
I proclaim our welcome to the herald, here after
a long time—if the news he brings is welcome.

Lichas

Our coming is good, lady, and good, too, our message,
based on accomplished fact. When a man prospers,
his profit must be to earn an excellent report.

Deianira

O kindest of men, tell me first what I want first
to hear: Shall I have Heracles alive?

Lichas

I can tell you that I left him not only alive
but strong and flourishing and unburdened by disease. 235

Deianira

Where? In a Greek or in a foreign land? Tell me.

Lichas

On a shore of Euboea, where he marks out altars
and tributes of the land's harvest for Cenean Zeus.

Deianira

Is he fulfilling a vow or obeying an oracle?

Lichas

A vow he took while he tried with his spear to overthrow 240
the country of these women whom you see before you.

Deianira

And by the gods, who are they, and who is their master?
They are pitiable, if their misfortune does not deceive me.

Lichas

He selected them when he sacked the city of Eurytus
as possessions for himself and a choice gift for the Gods. 245

Deianira

Was it against this city, then, that he was gone
an unforeseeable time, days beyond number?

Lichas

No, most of this time he was kept in Lydia,
and, as he himself declares, he was not free
but a bought slave. (One should not hesitate, lady, 250
to tell a tale where it is seen Zeus did the work.)
He was sold to Omphale, the foreign queen,
and served her a full year, as he says himself,
and was so stung by this disgrace he had to bear
that he set himself an oath and swore that he 255
would live to see the author of his suffering,
along with wife and child, all in slavery.

These were not empty words, but when he was pure again,
 he raised an army of strangers and came against the city
 of Eurytus, who alone of mortals was 260
 responsible, he claimed, for what he had suffered.
 Heracles had come to his house and to his hearth
 as an old friend. But Eurytus thundered greatly against him
 like the sea and spoke with great malice in his heart.
 Let Heracles have in his hands, he said, inescapable arrows. 265
 In the bow's test *his* sons left Heracles behind,
 as for speech—Heracles was a free man's slave,
 a broken thing! Then he got him drunk at the banquet
 and threw him out of the house. It was this that galled;
 and when one day Iphitus came to the hill of Tiryns, 270
 searching for the tracks of horses that had strayed,
 the moment his eyes looked one way, his mind on something else,
 Heracles hurled him from the top of that flat bastion.
 But the King was angry at this act of his,
 he who is the father of all, Zeus Olympian, 275
 and had him sold and sent out of the country and did not relent,
 since this was the only man he had ever killed
 by guile. If he had taken vengeance openly,
 Zeus surely would have pardoned his rightful victory.
 The Gods like foul play no better than do men. 280
 They who were so arrogant with their vicious tongues,
 they themselves all are inhabitants of Hell,
 while their city is enslaved. The women you see
 come to you, finding, in place of prosperity,
 an unenviable existence. These were your husband's wishes 285
 which he commanded and I, faithful to him, fulfil.
 You may be sure that he himself will come as soon
 as he has made the holy sacrifice to Zeus,
 God of his fathers, for his conquest. Of much news
 happily reported, this must be the sweetest to hear. 290

Chorus

O Queen, now your delight is clear, both for what
 has come about already, and what you have heard promised.

Deianira

Yes, I should have every right to rejoice
when I hear the news of my husband's great success.
Surely my joy must keep pace with his good fortune 295
Still, if one gives it much thought, one knows a feeling
of dread for the man who prospers so, lest he fall.

For a terrible sense of pity came over me,
my friends, when I saw these ill-fated women
wandering homeless, fatherless, in a foreign land. 300
Before they were, perhaps, the daughters of free men,
but now they shall have to pass their lives as slaves

O Zeus, who turns the tide of battle, grant that I
may never see you come like this against *my* children,
and if you will come, at least not while I am alive 305
This is the fear I feel when I look at them.

(Deianira comes close to Iole.)

O unfortunate girl, tell me who you are.
Are you married? Are you a mother? To judge by your looks,
you have never known treatment like this, but you
are someone noble. Lichas, whose daughter is this girl? 310
Who was her mother, and who was the father that begat her?
Speak out, for on seeing her I pitied her most
among these women, since only she knows how to feel.

Lichas

What do I know? Why do you question me? Perhaps
in birth she is not among the humblest of that land. 315

Deianira

Not of royal birth? Had Eurytus a daughter?

Lichas

I do not know. I made no long interrogation.

Deianira

Did you not learn her name from one of her companions?

Lichas

No, I did not. I performed my task in silence.

Deianira

Then do tell us yourself, my poor child, for it
would be a great shame not to know who *you* are. 320

Lichas

It will be quite unlike her manner up to now
if she begins to speak, I can assure you, since
she has not said a single thing, not one word yet.
She suffers constantly the weight of her misfortune 325
like pangs of labor, weeping and miserable, from the time
she left her wind-blown fatherland. Truly, it is her
bad luck that she cannot speak, but pardon her.

Deianira

Then let her be, and let her go into the house
however she please. She should not have further grief 330
on my account to add to her present unhappiness.
What she has already is enough. Let us all
enter the house so you may hasten wherever you wish
to go and I may see to the preparations within.

*(Deianira turns to lead Lichas and the captive women into the
house; the Messenger, who had stayed to one side while
Lichas spoke with Deianira, approaches and
detains her while the others pass indoors.)*

Messenger

Wait! Stay a moment here that you may learn, 335
without these others, who they are that you lead inside,
and, since you have heard nothing at all, you may discover
what you must. For of all this I have knowledge.

Deianira

What do you want? Why have you stopped me from going in?

Messenger

Stay and hear me. The earlier message you had from me 340
was no waste of time, nor, I think, will this be.

Deianira

Should we call the others back, or do you wish
to speak only to me and to my friends here?

Messenger

To you and your friends I may speak—leave the others.

Deianira

They are gone now, so please give me an explanation 345

Messenger

Nothing that man has just been telling you was spoken
in strict honesty. Either he is a liar now,
or he was no honest messenger before

Deianira

What are you saying? Tell me clearly everything
you know. I cannot understand what you have said 350

Messenger

I myself heard this man say—and many men
were present who can bear me out—that for the sake
of this girl Heracles destroyed Eurytus
and his high-towered Oechalia, and, of the Gods, it was
Love alone who bewitched him into this violence— 355
not his laborious service in Lydia for Omphale,
nor the fact that Iphitus was hurled to his death—
it was Love, whom he brushes aside in this new version.
But the truth is that when he could not persuade the father
to give the child to him for his secret bed, 360
he fabricated a petty complaint, an excuse
to campaign against the girl's country, and sacked 362/364
the city. And now, as you see, he is coming home 365
and has sent her here, not without a reason, lady,
and not to be a slave. You must not expect that!
It would not be likely if he is inflamed with desire.
So I thought it best to reveal the whole affair
to you, my mistress, just as I happened to hear it from him, 370
and there were many others listening to this same story
in the public gathering of the men of Trachis who can
refute him as well as I. If what I say is unkind,
I am sorry, but still I have told the strict truth.

Deianira

Oh! Oh! What has happened to me? I have
welcomed a secret enemy under my roof. 375
Oh, I am miserable, miserable! How truly nameless
is she, as the man who brought her swore to me—
a girl so brilliant in her looks and in her birth!

Messenger

Yes, she had Eurytus for her father and was called 380
Iole, but of course *he* could tell you nothing
of her origin since he had never asked!

Chorus

Damn all scoundrels, but damn him most of all
who practices a secret, degrading villainy.

Deianira

What shall I do? I must ask you, for the story 385
which has now come out leaves me utterly stunned.

Chorus

Go and talk to Lichas. Perhaps he would speak out
if you insisted on knowing, whether he liked it or not.

Deianira

I shall go Your advice is not unreasonable.

Messenger

Shall I wait meanwhile? What do you wish me to do? 390

Deianira

Stay, for I see the man has started from the house
of his own accord, without my summoning him.

(Lichas enters from the house.)

Lichas

Lady, what should I say when I come to Heracles?
Give me instructions, for, as you see, I am on my way.

Deianira

How quickly you are rushing off when you were 395
so long in coming, before we have even talked again.

Lichas

If there is anything you wish to ask me, I am at your service

Deianira

Will I be able to trust in the truth of what you say?

Lichas

Yes—great Zeus be my witness!—as far as my knowledge goes.

Deianira

Tell me, then, who is the woman you brought with you? 400

Lichas

A Euboean. But I do not know her parents.

Messenger

You there! Look here! To whom do you think you are talking?

Lichas

And you—what do you mean asking such a question?

Messenger

You would be well advised to try to answer me.

Lichas

I speak to her who commands, Deianira, daughter 405
of Oeneus and the consort of Heracles, if my eyes
do not deceive me—it is my *mistress* that I address.

Messenger

There it is, the very thing I wanted to hear.

You say she is your mistress?

Lichas

It is the honest truth.

Messenger

Well, then, what do you think should be your punishment 410
if you are discovered to have been dishonest with her?

Lichas

What do you mean “dishonest”? What are these tricky riddles?

Messenger

No riddles at all! You are the one who is being tricky.

Lichas

I am leaving. I have been a fool to listen so long.

Messenger

Not yet, not before you answer a few questions.

415

Lichas

Say what you want. You'll not be at a loss for words.

Messenger

That captive girl whom you brought to the house, you know
whom I mean?

Lichas

I do, but why do you ask about her?

Messenger

You look at her with no sign of recognition,
but did you not say she was Iole, the daughter of Eurytus?

420

Lichas

Where on earth did I say so? Who is going to come
and testify that he was there and heard me talk?

Messenger

You spoke before many of the townspeople. A large crowd
in the public place of Trachis heard you say this.

Lichas

Oh, yes—

They may have said they heard me. But to repeat an impression
is not the same as giving an accurate account.

425

Messenger

Impression, indeed! Did you not state under oath that you
were bringing this girl as a consort for Heracles?

Lichas

I said that? By the Gods, explain to me,
dear mistress—this stranger here, who on earth is he?

430

Messenger

A man who was there and heard you say her city was

completely crushed through desire for her; no woman
of Lydia destroyed it, but his clear love for her.

Lichas

Please have this fellow leave. No sensible person,
mistress, wastes his time exchanging words with a madman. 435

Deianira

By Zeus who flashes lightning over the topmost glen
of Oeta, do not cheat me of the truth! Speak,
and you will find that I am not a spiteful woman
nor one who does not know how it is with man—
we cannot always enjoy a constant happiness 440
How foolish one would be to climb into the ring
with Love and try to trade blows with him, like a boxer.
For he rules even the Gods as he pleases, and
he rules me—why not another woman like me?
You see that I would be altogether mad 445
to blame my husband, because he suffers from this sickness,
or that woman. She has been guilty of nothing shameful,
and she has done no harm to me. No, it is
inconceivable. If you have learned to lie from him,
then you are not learning honest lessons. If you school 450
yourself in this fashion, you succeed only
in seeming dishonest when you are trying to be decent.
Tell me the whole truth. To gain the reputation
of a liar is utter dishonor for a free man.
You cannot think that I will not hear. There are 455
many men to whom you have spoken, and they will tell me.

(Deianira pauses, but Lichas remains silent)

Are you afraid of hurting me? You are wrong.
The only thing that could hurt would be not to know.
Where is the danger in knowing? One man and many women—
Heracles has had other women before. 460
Never yet has one of them earned insults
from me, or spiteful talk, nor will *she*, even
if she is utterly absorbed in her passion,

for I pitied her deeply when I saw her because
her own beauty has destroyed her life, and, against her will, 465
this unfortunate girl has sacked and enslaved the land
of her fathers. Now let all this flow away
on the wind. To you I have this to say: You may
be dishonest with others, but never lie to me.

Chorus

Obeys her. What she says is good. You will have 470
no cause to complain later, and you will gain our thanks

Lichas

Well, dear mistress, I realize that you are not
unreasonable. You see things as we mortals must.
So I shall tell you the whole truth. I shall not hide it
It is just as this man said A terrible longing 475
ran through Heracles—and it *was* for this girl.
Because of her, Oechalia, the land of her fathers,
was overthrown by his spear with great destruction.
None of this did he tell me to hide, I must say
in fairness to him; none of this did he ever deny. 480
I myself, O my mistress, was fearful lest I
should cause pain in your breast by these words of mine
It was I who erred, if you would call this error.
But since, as it turns out, you know the whole story,
for your own sake as much as for his, be kind 485
to the woman and show that the words you spoke to her
before you knew were said in all sincerity.
Against all else he has won by sheer strength; but by
this love for her he has been completely vanquished.

Deianira

Those are my feelings too, and so too shall I act. 490
You may be sure I shall not choose to add to my
afflictions hopeless resistance to the Gods. Now let us
go into the house. I have messages for you
to carry, and there are gifts to match the gifts you brought—
these too you must take. It would not be right to leave 495
empty-handed when you came so well provided.

*(Deianira and Lichas and perhaps the Messenger,
who must be rewarded, enter the house.)*

Chorus

Strong is the victory the Cyprian Goddess always wins.
I pass by
the Gods; I would not tell how Zeus was tricked by her; 500
nor Hades, who lives in the night;
nor Poseidon, the shaker of the earth.

But for our lady's hand
who were the two valiant contenders in courtship?
Who were they who came out to struggle in bouts that were 505
all blows and all dust?

One was a strong river with the looks of a high-horned
four-footed bull,
Achelous from Oeniadae; the other 510
came from the Thebes of Bacchus,
shaking his back-sprung bow, his spears and club
—the son of Zeus. They came
together then in the middle, desiring
her bed. Alone, in the middle with them, their referee, 515
Cypris, goddess of love's bed.

Then there was thudding of fists and clang of bows
and confusion of bulls' horns;
and there was contorted grappling, 520
and there were deadly blows from butting heads
and groaning on both sides.

But the tender girl with the lovely
eyes sat far from them on a hillside,
waiting for the one who would be her husband. 525

So the struggle raged, as I have told it;
but the bride over whom they fought
awaited the end pitifully.
And then she was gone from her mother,
like a calf that is lost. 530

(*Deianira comes out from the house.*)

Deianira

Dear friends, while our visitor is in the house
talking to the captured girls before he leaves,
I have come out to you, unobserved. I want
to tell you the work my hands have done, but also to have
your sympathy as I cry out for all I suffer. 535

For here I have taken on a girl—no,
I can think that no longer—a married woman, as
a ship's master takes on cargo, goods that outrage my heart.
So now the two of us lie under the one sheet
waiting for his embrace. This is the gift my brave 540
and faithful Heracles sends home to his dear wife
to compensate for his long absence! And yet, when he
is sick as he so often is with this same sickness,
I am incapable of anger. But to live

in the same house with her, to share the same marriage,
that is something else. What woman could stand that? 545

For I see her youth is coming to full bloom
while mine is fading. The eyes of men love to pluck
the blossoms; from the faded flowers they turn away.

And this is why I am afraid that he may 550
be called my husband but be the younger woman's man.

But no sensible woman, as I've said before,
should let herself give way to rage. I shall tell you,
dear friends, the solution I have to bring myself relief.

I have had hidden in a copper urn 555
for many years the gift of a centaur, long ago.

While I was still a child, I took it from the wounds
of the hairy-chested Nessus as he was dying.

He used to ferry people, for a fee, across
the deep flood of the Evenus, in his arms 560
with no oars to drive him over nor ships' sails.

I too was carried on his shoulders when my father
sent me to follow Heracles for the first time

as his wife. When I was halfway across
his hands touched me lustfully. I cried out and at once 565
the son of Zeus turned around, raised his hands,
and shot a feathered arrow through his chest; into
his lungs it hissed. The beast spoke his last words to me
as he died: "Daughter of old Oeneus,
if you listen to me, you shall have great profit 570
from my ferrying, since you are the last I have brought across.
If you take in your hands this blood, clotted in
my wounds, wherever it is black with the bile
of the Hydra, the monstrous serpent of Lerna, in which
he dipped his arrows, you will have a charm over 575
the heart of Heracles, so he will never look
at another woman and love her more than you."
I have thought of this, my friends, for since his death
I have kept it in the house, tightly closed.
I followed all instructions he gave me while he still lived 580
and dipped this robe in the charm. Now it is all done.

I am not a woman who tries to be—and may
I never learn to be—bad and bold. I hate
women who are. But if somehow by these charms,
these spells I lay on Heracles, I can defeat 585
the girl—well, the move is made, unless you think
I am acting rashly. If so, I shall stop.

Chorus

If there is reason for confidence in these measures,
you do not seem to us to have acted badly.

Deianira

I have this much confidence only: there seem to be 590
good prospects, but I have never brought them to the test.

Chorus

One can only tell from action. Whatever you think,
you have no way of judging before you try it out.

Deianira

Well, we shall know soon. I see the messenger
coming out of doors, and he will be going shortly. 595
Only be discreet. In darkness one may be
ashamed of what one does, without the shame of disgrace

(Lichas comes out from the house.)

Lichas

What would you wish me to do? Command me, O daughter of
Oeneus.

I have already stayed too long, and now I am late.

Deianira

Lichas, this is the very thing I have looked after 600
while you were talking to the foreign women inside.
Here is a gift made by my own hands for you
to take to my husband—this long, fine-woven robe
When you give it to him, you must tell him that it
should touch the skin of no man before it touches his, 605
nor should he let the light of the sun look upon it,
nor any holy inclosure, nor the gleam from a hearth,
until he himself stands, conspicuous before all,
and shows it to the Gods on a day of bull-slaughtering.
For this was my vow: if I should ever see or hear 610
that he was coming safe to his home, in all piety
I would dress him in this robe to appear before
the Gods to make new sacrifice in new clothing
And you shall carry a token of this vow which he
will understand from the familiar encircled print 615
of my seal.

Go now, and as a messenger
be sure to keep the rule not to exceed your orders.
In this way, with thanks both from my husband and
from me, you will earn our double gratitude.

Lichas

If I, the messenger, practice this art of Hermes 620
soundly, I shall never fail in serving you.

« THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS »

I shall present this chest exactly as it is,
and in explanation I shall repeat your words.

Deianira

Then you should be going now You understand
completely how everything is here in this house. 625

Lichas

I understand, and I shall report that all is well.

Deianira

And, of course, since you saw it, you know the girl's
reception—you know I received her as a friend.

Lichas

Yes, I do, and I am astonished and delighted.

Deianira

What else is there to tell him? For I am afraid 630
you would be talking too soon of my longing for him
before I know if *he* feels longing for me.

(Exit Lichas through a side entrance; Deianira enters the house.)

Chorus

Safe harbors, hot-springs among
the rocks, the high cliffs of Oeta—
all you who live by these and by the inmost reaches 635
of the sea in Malis,
the coast of the Maid who shoots the golden shaft,
and there at the Gates,
the famous gatherings of the Greeks—

Soon again the lovely cries 640
of the flute will rise among you;
now it will not ring in disagreeable clamor
but like the lyre, music
for the gods. The son of Zeus and Alcmena
hurries to his home 645
bearing the prizes of all valor.

Gone from the city completely,
 we missed him, waiting a long twelve months, while he
 was on the sea, but we knew
 nothing, and his loving wife 650
 all lamentation always, sadly, most
 sadly, broke her heart.
 But now Ares, God of War,
 stung to madness, dispels her day of troubles.

Oh let him come, let him come, 655
 and his ship of many oars, let it
 not stop before he ends his journey
 at this city, leaving the island
 hearth where, they say, he makes sacrifice.
 Let him come from there 660
 all desire when the beast's
 inducements, all dipped in persuasion, have melted him.

(Deianira comes out from the house.)

Deianira

O my friends, I am afraid! Can it be
 I have gone too far in all I have just done?

Chorus

What is the matter, Deianira, child of Oeneus? 665

Deianira

I don't know. I have a foreboding that I'll be shown
 to have done great harm when I hoped to do good.

Chorus

Surely you do not mean your gift to Heracles?

Deianira

Yes, yes. Now I see that one should never
 plunge eagerly into anything obscure. 670

Chorus

Explain the cause of your fear, if it can be explained.

Deianira

Something has happened which, if I tell you, my friends,
will seem a marvel such as you never thought to hear.
Just now, when I anointed the robe I sent to be
my husband's vestment, I used a tuft of fleecy white wool. 675
This piece has disappeared, devoured by nothing in
the house but destroyed by itself, eaten away
and crumbled completely to dust I want to tell you this
in detail, so you may know the whole story.

I neglected none of the instructions that beast 680
the centaur explained to me, lying in agony
with the sharp arrowhead in his side. I kept them
like an inscription on bronze that cannot be washed away.
And I only did what I was told to do—
I must keep this drug away from fire and always 685
deep in the house where no warm ray of light may touch it
until I should want to apply it freshly smeared.
And this is what I did Now, when it had to do its work,
at home, inside the house, secretly I smeared it on
some wool, a scrap I pulled from one of the household sheep, 690
and then I folded my gift and put it in a chest
before the sun could shine on it, as you saw.

But when I go in again, I see something
unspeakable, incomprehensible to human reason
Somehow I had happened to throw the ball of wool, 695
which I had used to smear the robe, into the full heat
of the sun's rays, and, as it became warm,
it all ran together, a confused mass, and crumbled
to bits on the ground, looking most like the dust one sees
eaten away in the cutting of a piece of wood 700
Like this it lies where it fell But from the earth
on which it rests, clotted foam boils up
like the rich liquid of the blue-green fruit
from the vines of Dionysus, poured on the earth.

And now I do not know what to think. I see
 myself as someone who has done a terrible thing 705
 From what possible motive, in return for what,
 could the dying beast have shown me kindness, when he
 was dying because of me? No, he beguiled me,
 only to destroy the man who shot him. But I 710
 have come to understand now when it is too late.
 I alone, unless my fears are fanciful,
 I, his unhappy wife, shall destroy him.
 I know that arrow which struck Nessus injured even
 Chiron, who was a god, and all animals, 715
 whatever it touches, it kills. This same poison which seeped,
 black and bloody, from the wounds of Nessus, how can
 it fail to kill Heracles too? At least, this is
 my fear. And yet I have made a decision: if he goes down,
 under the same blow I will die with him. 720
 I could not bear to live and hear myself called evil
 when my only wish is to be truly good.

Chorus

Terrible results are appalling, but one
 should not expect the worst before anything has happened.

Deianira

When the plans themselves are bad, there can be 725
 no expectations that leave any place for courage.

Chorus

But whenever we trip up unwillingly,
 the anger felt is tempered, and so it should be with you.

Deianira

You may talk like this, since you have no share
 in the wrong; you have no burden all your own. 730

Chorus

Better to be silent now—say nothing more,
 if you do not want to tell it to your son.
 The one who went away to search for his father is here.

(*Hyllus enters from the side*)

Hyllus

Mother! I wish I could have found you not as you are
but no longer alive, or safe but someone else's
mother, or somehow changed and with a better heart
than now. Three ways—Oh, for any one of them!

735

Deianira

My son, what has happened that I should be so hateful?

Hyllus

What has happened? Your husband, my father—
do you hear me?—you have killed him.

740

Deianira

No, no, my child! What have you blurted out?

Hyllus

Only what cannot fail to be. Once a thing
is seen, who can cause it never to have been?

Deianira

How could you say it? Who on earth told you
that I did this awful crime you charge me with?

745

Hyllus

I saw my father's heavy fall with my own eyes
myself; I did not hear of it from anyone.

Deianira

Where did you come upon him? Were you at his side?

Hyllus

If you must hear, then I must talk and tell you all.
When he sacked the famous city of Eurytus,
he marched away with the trophies and the first-fruits of victory.
On a wave-beaten shore of Euboea there is
a point called Cenaeum, where he marked out altars
and a whole precinct for Zeus, god of our fathers.
There I first saw him, glad after my longing.
He was about to make great slaughter for sacrifice

750

755

when his own herald Lichas arrived from our home,
 bringing with him that gift of yours, the deadly robe.
 He clothed himself in it just as you had instructed
 and killed first his bulls, twelve perfect victims, 760
 the pick of the booty; then he brought the number to
 one hundred, driving a mixed herd to the altar.
 And at first the poor wretch, his mind at ease,
 rejoicing in his handsome dress, prayed to the Gods.
 But as the flame from the juicy pine-wood fire 765
 blazed high and bloody from the solemn rites,
 the sweat broke out on his skin; the robe enfolded him
 around his limbs, joined tightly to his sides
 like the work of a sculptor. Spasms of pain
 bit into his bones. Then like the vicious, murderous 770
 viper's poison, it began to consume him.

Now he shouted for that unfortunate Lichas, who was
 in no way guilty of your crime, demanding
 to know the plot behind his bringing him this robe.
 Unlucky man, he knew nothing and said it was 775
 a gift from you alone, just as you had sent it.
 And at that moment, as Heracles listened to his answer,
 a piercing, tearing pain clutched at his lungs; he caught
 Lichas by the foot where the ankle turns
 and threw him against a wave-beaten rock that juts from the sea. 780
 It pressed the pale brains out through his hair,
 and, split full on, skull and blood mixed and spread.
 All the people there cried out in horror for
 the one man in his suffering, the other dead.
 No one had the courage to come to Heracles. 785
 He would be wrenched now to the ground, now in the air,
 crying, shrieking. All around the rocks echoed,
 the mountain headlands of Locris, the high cliffs of Euboea.
 When he gave up at last, after throwing himself
 miserably again and again to the earth, crying 790

« THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS »

and groaning again and again, damning the mismating
in your wretched bed, the whole marriage that he
had won from Oeneus, only to befoul his life,
he raised his eyes, distorted, from the dark smoke
that hung around him and saw me in the great crowd,
tears pouring down my face, and, looking at me, called.

795

"My son, come to me! Do not run from me
in my pain, even if you must die with me.
Take me away! Above all else I ask you to put me
in a place where no man can look at me.

800

If you have pity, at least carry me out of this land
as soon as you can, that I may not die here."

These were his orders; we placed him in the middle of
a boat and with difficulty landed him here,
howling in spasms of pain. You shall be seeing him
at once, still alive or dead only now.

805

Mother, this is what you have planned and done to my father,
and you are caught. For this, Justice who punishes
and the Fury will requite you. If it is right
for a son, I curse you, and it is right, since you
have given me the right by killing the best of all men
on earth, such as you shall never see again.

810

(Deianira moves away and leaves by the side.)

Chorus (to Deianira)

Why do you go off in silence? Surely you see
that by silence you join your accuser and accuse yourself?

Hyllus

Let her go, and I hope a fair wind blows
to carry her far out of my sight. For why should she
maintain the pointless dignity of the name
of mother when she acts in no way like a mother?
No, let her go—goodbye to her. And the delight
she gave my father, may she find the same herself.

815

820

(Hyllus enters the house.)

Chorus

See, maidens, how, suddenly, it has closed
 with us, the prophetic word spoken
 with foreknowledge long ago, that said
 when the year of the twelfth plowing came to an end,
 then it would bring an end for the true-born son of Zeus 825
 to his relay of toils. And now, surely,
 at the right time, it all comes home.
 How can he who no longer sees
 still have, still, toilsome
 servitude, when he is dead? 830

If there clings to him in a murderous cloud
 the centaur's treacherous, sure trap
 and his sides are soaked with venom
 that Death begat and the shimmering serpent bred,
 how shall he see another sun after today's 835
 when the Hydra, horrible and monstrous, has
 soaked in? From the black-maned beast's
 treacherous words there comes to torture him
 a murderous confusion,
 sharp points brought to burning heat 840

She, poor woman, knew nothing of this
 but, seeing great injury for her home
 from a new marriage swiftly approaching,
 applied her remedy; 845
 but what came from another's will, a fatal meeting,
 truly, lost, she laments,
 truly, she weeps a pale,
 foaming flood of tears Doom
 as it advances makes clear before
 it comes a great disaster from treachery. 850

A spring of tears burst open.
 Such sickness, alas, has poured upon him, suffering
 to pity as never yet came upon the hero

from his enemies. 855
Woe for the dark head of the front-fighting spear
that won in battle this
fatal bride from steep
Oechalia. But that silent
handmaiden, Cyprian Aphrodite, 860
is revealed, it is her work.

(Wailing is heard inside the house.)

Chorus (the women speak separately throughout this scene)

Can I be mistaken? Do I hear something,
a cry of grief surging now through the house?
What can I say? 865
The sound is all too clear. They are shrieking for
misfortune inside. The house suffers a new blow.

(The Nurse comes out of the house.)

And see
this old woman who is coming toward us, to tell us
something, see how sad she is and how she frowns. 870

Nurse

O maidens, that gift she sent to Heracles,
truly it was the beginning of great sorrow for us.

Chorus

What new calamity have you to tell us, old woman?

Nurse

Deianira, motionless, has moved away
to start upon the very last of all her journeys. 875

Chorus

No, you cannot mean she is dead?

Nurse

You know all

Chorus

Then she is dead, the poor woman?

Nurse

I tell you again, she is.

Chorus

Gone, poor thing! Can you tell us how she died?

Nurse

Horrible, the way it happened!

Chorus

Tell us, woman,

the fate she met

880

Nurse

She destroyed herself.

Chorus

Was her mind in a passion or sick?

Nurse

The weapon's cruel point
killed her.

Chorus

How could she think of
death on top of death
and end her life all alone?

885

Nurse

The grim steel cut her.

Chorus

And helpless did you see her awful act?

Nurse

Yes, I saw it. For I was standing near her there.

Chorus

Oh, what was it? How? Tell us.

890

Nurse

She herself by herself set her hand to it.

Chorus

What are you saying?

Nurse

The clear truth.

Chorus

That bride, newly come,
has borne, has borne a mighty
Fury for this house.

895

Nurse

Yes, and if you had been near and had seen
what Deianira did, still more would you pity.

Chorus

How could any woman bring her hands to this?

Nurse

Yes, it was terrible. You will learn everything
and bear me witness When she went into the house, alone,
and saw her son in the courtyard, arranging a cushioned bed
to take with him as he went back to meet his father,
she hid herself where no one might look at her and groaned,
falling against the altars, that now they would be
deserted; and whenever she touched some household thing
she used to use before, the poor creature would weep.
Here and there, from room to room, she kept turning,
and if she saw some servant of the household who was
dear to her, she would look at her sadly and weep,
and she would call out loud to her fate and to
her house that would have no children any more.

900

905

910

Then she stops all this, and suddenly I see her
rushing into the bedchamber of Heracles,
and secretly, from the shadows, I keep watch
over her. I see the woman casting sheets
and spreading them upon the bed of Heracles.
Then, as soon as she had finished, she leapt up
and sat there in the middle of her marriage bed,
and, bursting into torrents of hot tears, she said:
"O my bed, O my bridal chamber, farewell
now forever, for never again will you take me
to lie as a wife between these sheets of yours."

915

920

She says nothing more, but with a violent sweep
of her arm unfastens her gown where a pin
of beaten gold lies above her breast. She had 925
uncovered her whole side and her left arm.
And I go running off with all the strength I have
and tell her son what his mother is planning to do.
But in the time I have been rushing there and back
we see that she has cut her side to the liver 930
and the seat of life with a double-bladed sword.
Her son shrieked, for he realized, poor boy,
that in his anger he had forced her to this act.
He had just learned from people in the house that she
had done unwittingly the will of the beast. 935

Then the miserable boy abandoned himself utterly
to sobs and mourning for his mother; he threw himself
upon her lips and there, pressing his side to hers,
he lay and groaned over and over that he
had struck her thoughtlessly with a cruel accusation, 940
weeping because at one moment he was doubly
orphaned for all his life, losing his father and her.

*(The Nurse throws open the doors of the house, revealing
Hyllus and the body of Deianira,
lying on a couch.)*

This is the way things are within. If anyone
counts upon one day ahead or even more,
he does not think. For there can be no tomorrow 945
until we have safely passed the day that is with us still.

(The Nurse enters the house.)

Chorus

Which shall I lament first?
Which is the more final disaster?
In my distress I cannot tell.
The one we can see in the house, 950

the other besets us in our thoughts—
to have and to await are the same

Oh for a strong blast
of fair wind coming to my hearth
to carry me away from this place 955
that I may not die of fright
when I no more than look
at Zeus's valiant son.
They say he is coming to the house
in unassuageable pain, 960
a wonder beyond telling

*(Men enter from the side, carrying Heracles in a litter,
accompanied by an old man; Hyllus enters from
the house, closing the doors after him)*

Near, then, not distant
is he for whom I cried, like the shrill
nightingale. Here strangers are approaching. 965
How are they carrying him? As though
mourning for a friend,
their steps are slow, soundless.
Ah! He is carried without a word.
Am I to think that he
is dead or only asleep? 970

Hyllus

O my father!
O my sorrow! What is left
for me? How can I help?

Old Man

Be silent, child, do not excite
the wild pain that makes him savage. 975
He still lives, though fallen. You must
bite your lips.

Hyllus

What? Alive?

Old Man

Do not wake him, held fast in sleep.
Do not excite, do not set stirring
that awful returning
sickness.

980

Hyllus

But it drives me mad,
so helpless under an immense weight!

Heracles

O Zeus,
what land have I come to? Among what men
do I lie worn out by these
unceasing pains? O my agony!
The filthy thing eats me again.

985

Old Man

Now do you see how much better it was
to hide your sorrow in silence, nor shatter
sleep from his head
and eyes?

990

Hyllus

No, I cannot stand it
when I see him in this suffering.

Heracles

O altar steps of Cenaeum, is this
all the thanks you win me for all
the sacrifice I made on you?
O Zeus! Torture, torture is all
you give me! I wish I had never seen you
with these poor eyes that must face now
this inexorable flowering of madness.
Is there any singer of spells,
any craftsman surgeon who can
exorcise this curse, but Zeus?
Even to see him would be a wonder!

995

1000

(The bearers set the litter down.)

Oh! Let me be Let
me sleep in my misery, 1005
let me sleep my last sleep.

Where are you touching me? Where are you laying me?
You are killing me, killing me.
You have prodded awake what slumbered.

It has caught me. Oh! It comes on again. 1010
O most ungrateful of the Greeks, where are all you
for whom I destroyed myself purging so many beasts
from all the seas and woods? Now when *I* am sick,
will no one turn the beneficial fire, the sword on me?

Oh! Why will no one 1015
come and cut away
my head from my abominable body.

(The Old Man tries to restrain and support Heracles.)

Old Man

Come, you are the man's son The task is more
than my strength can manage. You must help. Your strength
can easily do more for him than I.

Hyllus

I touch him, 1020
but to make him unconscious of pain, that is beyond
my power or any man's. Such is the will of Zeus.

Heracles

My son, my son! where are you? Help me, here,
here, lift me up. Oh! Oh! My fate! 1025

It lunges, lunges again, the vile thing
is destroying me—
savage, unapproachable sickness. 1030

O Pallas! It is torturing me again. O my son,
pity me who begot you, draw the sword—no one 1035

will blame you—strike me in the breast, heal the pain
with which your godless mother has made me rage. Oh
to see her fallen, felled by this death she deals me! 1040

Sweet Hades, kinsman, brother of Zeus, lull me to sleep,
to sleep; with quick death end my agony

Chorus

My friends, I hear and shudder at the king's misfortunes—
so great a man, hounded by such suffering. 1045

Heracles

Many are the toils for these hands, this back,
that I have had, hot and painful even to tell of.
But neither the wife of Zeus nor hateful Eurystheus
has ever condemned me to such agony as this
that the false-faced daughter of Oeneus has fastened 1050
upon my shoulders, a woven, encircling net
of the Furies, by which I am utterly destroyed.
It clings to my sides, it has eaten away
my inmost flesh; it lives with me and empties the channels
of my lungs, and already it has drunk up 1055
my fresh blood, and my whole body is
completely killed, conquered by these unspeakable fetters.
Neither the spear of battle, nor the army of
the earth-born Giants, nor the violence of beasts,
nor Greece, nor any place of barbarous tongue, not all 1060
the lands I came to purify could ever do this.
A woman, a female, in no way like a man,
she alone without even a sword has brought me down.

O my son, now truly be my true-born son
and do not pay more respect to the name of mother. 1065
Bring her from the house with your own hands and put
her in my hands, that woman who bore you, that I may know
clearly whether it pains you more to see *my* body
mutilated or *hers* when it is justly tortured.
Come, my child, dare to do this. Pity me, 1070

for I seem pitiful to many others, crying
and sobbing like a girl, and no one could ever say
that he had seen this man act like that before.
Always without a groan I followed my painful course.
Now in my misery I am discovered a woman.

1075

Come close to me now, stand by your father and
look well at my misfortune, see what I suffer.
I shall take off the coverings and show you. Look,
all of you, do you behold this poor body?
Can you see how miserable, how pitiful I am?

1080

Oh, oh, the pain!

That malignant tearing scorches me again,
it shoots through my sides, it *will* have me struggle,
it will not let me be—miserable, devouring sickness
O King Hades, receive me!
O flash of Zeus, strike!

1085

Drive against me, O King, hurl down the bolt
of lightning, Father. Now it feeds on me again,
it has sprung out, it blooms. O my hands, my hands,
O my back, my chest, O my poor arms, see
what has become of you from what you once were.
The lion that prowled the land of Nemea, that scourge of herds-
men,

1090

that unapproachable, intractable creature,
with your strength once you overpowered it,
and the serpent of Lerna and that galloping army
of double-bodied, hostile beasts, violent, lawless,
supremely strong, and the boar of Erymanthus,
and under the earth the hell hound with three heads,
irresistible monster, the awful Echidna's whelp,
and guarding the golden apples the dragon at the end of the
earth—

1100

and I have had my taste of ten thousand other toils,
but these hands let no one set his trophies over me.

Now look at me, torn to shreds, my limbs unhinged,
a miserable ruin sacked by invisible disaster, I
who am called the son of the most noble mother, 1105
I who claim to be begotten of Zeus in the heavens
But I tell you this, even if I am nothing,
nothing that can even crawl, even so—
only let her come who has done this to me—
these hands will teach her, and she can tell the world. alive 1110
I punished the evil, and I punish them in death.

Chorus

O unhappy Greece, I can see how great
a mourning you shall have if you lose this man.

Hyllus

Father, since you let me speak to you now,
let me have silence while I speak, though you are sick. 1115
I ask only for what is right. Give me yourself
without this grim anger which stings you to such fury
Otherwise you cannot know how mistaken
is the pleasure your fury craves, the pain it feels.

Heracles

Say what you want and be done with it I am too sick— 1120
I can make no sense at all of your riddles.

Hyllus

It is about my mother that I come to speak,
about her present state and her unwilling error.

Heracles

Damn you! How dare you speak of her again, the mother
Who is a father's murderer—and in my hearing? 1125

Hyllus

Her state is such that one should not keep silent.

Heracles

No, no silence for the crime she has committed!

Hyllus

Nor for what she has done today, you will admit.

Heracles

Speak, but beware. Do not disgrace yourself

Hyllus

I shall speak She is dead She has just been killed.

1130

Heracles

By whom? I cannot believe it It is too bitter news

Hyllus

She is dead by her own hand and by no other

Heracles

Ah! She's dead too soon. She should have died by mine

Hyllus

Even your fury would turn aside if you knew all

Heracles

A strange beginning, but go on—what do you mean?

1135

Hyllus

In all that she did wrong she had intended good.

Heracles

Good? Does she do good when she kills your father?

Hyllus

It was a charm for love she wanted to put on you
that failed—when she saw that marriage in her house

Heracles

Who in Trachis knows such deadly drugs as this?

1140

Hyllus

Nessus the centaur long ago persuaded her
to excite your desire with this fatal charm

Heracles

Woe, woe is me! This is my miserable end.
Lost! I am lost! I see the light no longer
Ah! Now I know the doom that is upon me
Come, my child. You no longer have a father.
Call together all my children, your brothers,

1145

and call the unhappy Alcmena who was the bride of Zeus
to her cost. You shall learn from me with my
last words all the prophecies I know

1150

Hyllus

But your mother is not here. It happens that
she is living now at Tiryns on the sea,
and of your children she has taken some with her
to care for, and others, I must tell you, are living in Thebes.
But all of us who are here—if there is anything,
Father, we must do, we shall listen and serve you.

1155

Heracles

Then hear your task. You have come to that point
where you must show the sort of man you are that you
are called my son Long ago my father revealed
to me that I should die by nothing that draws breath
but by someone dead, an inhabitant of Hell.
This was that beast, the centaur, who has in death killed me
alive, even as it had been divinely revealed.
Now I shall show you how more recent prophecies
agree with this exactly and give support to the old
I went to the grove of the mountain-dwelling Selis who sleep
upon the ground and I copied down the words
from my father's oak that speaks with many tongues,
which told me that, at this present, living time,
release from all the toils imposed on me would be
complete. And I thought that then I would be happy.
But it only meant that I would die then.
For the dead there are no more toils. My son,
since all this is coming true so clearly, you must
be ready to stand by my side in the fight, and you must not
hesitate till I am forced to use sharp words.
On your own, agree to act with me; discover
yourself the finest rule—obedience to your father.

1160

1165

1170

1175

Hyllus

Father, I am alarmed to see where your words lead,
but I shall obey you in whatever you decide.

1180

Heracles

You must give me your right hand first of all.

Hyllus

Will you tell me why you must have this strong pledge?

Heracles

Quickly, give me your hand. Do not disobey me.

Hyllus

Here, I reach my hand. I shall deny you nothing.

Heracles

Swear now by the head of Zeus who begot me.

1185

Hyllus

Swear to do what? Will you tell me that?

Heracles

Swear to fulfil completely the task I give to you

Hyllus

I do swear, and I take my oath on Zeus

Heracles

And pray for punishment if you break your oath.

Hyllus

I pray, though I shall keep my oath and not be punished.

1190

Heracles

You know that high crag of Zeus on Mount Oeta?

Hyllus

Yes. I have often stood there to sacrifice.

Heracles

Then you must take my body up there, with your
own hands and with the help of any friends you wish,
and you must fell a great forest of deep-rooted oak,
and many trees of the lusty wild olive

1195

you must cut down as well, and put my body on them,
and then take the flaming brand of a pine torch
and burn. Let me have no tears, no mourning Do
your job without lamentation, without tears, 1200
if you are your father's son, or even below
I shall wait for you, a crushing curse forever.

Hyllus

Oh! What are you saying? What have you forced me to do?

Heracles

What must be done. If you do not do it, then be
another man's son—do not call yourself mine. 1205

Hyllus

Father, Father, how can you? You are asking me
to be your murderer, polluted with your blood.

Heracles

No, I am not. I ask you to be my healer,
the only physician who can cure my suffering.

Hyllus

How would I cure your body by setting it on fire? 1210

Heracles

If that frightens you, do the rest at least.

Hyllus

I shall carry you there—that I could not begrudge you.

Heracles

And you will complete the pyre as I told you?

Hyllus

So long as I do not touch it with my own hands.
Everything else I shall do. You can be sure of me. 1215

Heracles

Even that much is enough. Now after your other
great kindness, do me this one small favor.

Hyllus

No matter how great a favor it is, it shall be done.

Heracles

You know, of course, the girl who is the daughter of Eurytus?

Hyllus

It is Iole you mean, I suppose.

1220

Heracles

I see you know her. This, then, is what I tell you to do,
my son. When I die, if you wish to be pious
and remember the oaths you have sworn to your father,
you must take this girl as your wife, and do not
disobey me. No other man but you must ever
have her who has lain with me at my side. You,
my son, must engage yourself to her bed.
Obey. Although you listen to me in greater matters,
disobedience in lesser things wipes out the favor.

1225

Hyllus

Ah! It is wrong to argue with a sick man,
yet how can one stand to see him with such thoughts as these?

1230

Heracles

You speak as if you would do none of the things I ask.

Hyllus

How could anyone when she alone shares
the blame for my mother's death and your condition?
How could anyone choose to do that, unless
avenging fiends had made his mind sick? Better
for me, too, to die than live with my worst enemy.

1235

Heracles

I see the man will not give me my due, though I
am dying; but I tell you, if you disobey
my commands, the curse of the Gods will be waiting for you.

1240

Hyllus

Oh! Soon, I can see, you will show how sick you are.

Heracles

You! You rouse my agony from its sleep.

Hyllus

So wretched, so helpless am I, no matter where I turn.

Heracles

Because you do not choose to listen to your father.

Hyllus

But shall I listen, Father, and learn impiety?

1245

Heracles

It is no impiety if you give my heart pleasure.

Hyllus

Do you command me and make it right for me to do this?

Heracles

I do command you, and I call the Gods to witness.

Hyllus

I shall do it then, and I shall not forswear
since you have shown the Gods it is your will. No one
could think me wrong in obeying you, Father.

1250

Heracles

In the end you act well. Now make your mercy
follow swift upon your words. Put me on
the pyre before another tearing, stinging blow
can strike. Come, hurry. Lift me up. The true
respite from suffering is this—my final end.

1255

Hyllus

Nothing can prevent its full accomplishment
for you, since you command and compel me, Father.

Heracles

Come then, O my tough soul,
before this sickness is stirred again,
set a steel bit in my mouth,
hold back the shriek, and make an end
of this unwanted, welcome task.

1260

*(The bearers raise the litter and leave by the side,
followed by Hyllus and the Chorus.)*

Hyllus

Raise him, my helpers. From you let me have
much compassion now for what I do. 1265

You see how little compassion the Gods
have shown in all that's happened; they
who are called our fathers, who begot us,
can look upon such suffering.

No one can foresee what is to come. 1270

What is here now is pitiful for us
and shameful for the Gods;
but of all men it is hardest for him
who is the victim of this disaster.

(Hyllus turns to the leader of the Chorus.)

Maiden, come from the house with us. 1275

You have seen a terrible death
and agonies, many and strange, and there is
nothing here which is not Zeus.

(Exeunt)

ELECTRA

Translated and with an Introduction by

DAVID GRENE



INTRODUCTION TO THE *ELECTRA*

IT is often said by classical scholars that, of the three dramatic treatments of the Orestes legend which we possess in the Greek tragedies, that of Sophocles stands closest to the Homeric account. Homer introduces the story of Orestes several times in the *Odyssey* and always for its exemplary effect. The return of Orestes and the punishment of Aegisthus, and only incidentally Clytemnestra, is mentioned as a warning of what will happen to the suitors when Odysseus comes home. Homer shows no awareness of the brutality of the murder of the mother by her son or of any of the consequences, religious or sociological, which interest both Aeschylus and Euripides later. The whole is a saga of successful revenge. It is worth noticing, of course, that Homer introduces the incident as an *example* of what may happen when Odysseus comes home. He is not giving us his speculations on matricide. Still, even at that, it is perhaps curious that the revenge taken, including the killing of Clytemnestra, can be treated with such clarity of moral judgment in favor of the killers.

In outline Sophocles appears to handle the story as Homer does, as a revenge theme, with no divine or other sanctions invoked against the murderers. But it is difficult to believe that Sophocles' interpretation should be taken on so simple a level. Almost forty-five years before the Sophoclean play, Aeschylus had written the *Oresteia*, which treated the legend with exactly the questions in mind that Homer had omitted. The *Oresteia* was a great popular success. It is extremely unlikely that Sophocles later could have reverted to the older and simpler explanation of the story without submitting a new interpretation of his own. The latter is, in fact, what he did.

He certainly did write with the Homeric outline in mind. For instance, in Aeschylus the responsibility for goading Orestes to kill both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra is Apollo's, and consequently the purification, with all its attendant complications and conflict, belongs

to Apollo. Sophocles minimized Apollo's role, mentioning him only a few times in the play as the author of indefinitely favorable oracles. The question of the purification or of Orestes' madness after the killing of his mother does not arise. But Sophocles has used the very flatness of the Homeric version to emphasize the unspoken questions which are in the mind of his fifth-century audience. If this is simply a story of murder and the settlement of a family feud, including the killing of a mother by her son, we are given a special Sophoclean portrait of the figures involved—mother, daughter, son, and Aegisthus, but especially Electra, the elder daughter.

For the play is rightly called after Electra. All the other people are included, principally, so that we should know more about her when we see her dealing with them—the savage, yet frightened, mother; the cautious and rather colorless Orestes; the timid, sensible, and unattractive sister; and the vulgar and bullying Aegisthus. Everyone acts as the foil of Electra. Everyone brings out another shade in the character previously missing. Electra makes no soliloquies to reveal herself as she does in Euripides. She is herself, in relation to others. She seems hardly to exist as a person except as a combination of reactions to others' deeds and words. Her father's death, her mother's enmity, her sister's passiveness, her brother's delay, Aegisthus' tyranny—these are her life. She says again and again that they are the causes for her being what she is.

Furthermore, Sophocles shows us Electra in reaction to happenings that in fact never took place. The disguised Paedagogus gives a vivid account of a chariot race in which Orestes is killed, the whole story being false. Orestes arrives, disguised, accompanied by the urn which supposedly contains his own ashes. Both of these are remarkable incidents as we have them in the play. The chariot race which occupies nearly 200 lines, or almost one-seventh of the entire piece, is based partly on that described in the *Iliad*, Book xxiii. It may also be based partly on some famous contemporary chariot race in which the audience would be interested and of which we know nothing. But the more exciting the account, the more it engaged the audience's attention, the greater, surely, must have been the jolt when it was realized that the description corresponded to no dramatic reality.

The terrible grief felt by Electra when she saw the urn believed to contain her brother's ashes must have awakened a jarring emotion in the audience, who knew that he was not dead, and some resentment at Orestes for standing by his sister and not telling her. These things are too gross to be explained away by any contrast between the Athenian audience's expectation and those of the theater of our own time. I think we are meant to see Electra not as a real person in her own right but as a mass of responses to other persons and their deeds and words, whether true or false. It is hard to imagine her loving someone understandingly, as Tecmessa and Deianeira did. Husbandless, childless, as she describes herself, cut off from father and mother and sister, she moves in an atmosphere of hate and hysteria provoked by facts and lies indiscriminately.

If we still think that Electra is justified by Sophocles, let us notice that she directs Aegisthus' body to be thrown to the dogs. This is, as all Greek students know, an outrage on religion and human decency, as the fifth century understood it, and is described as such by Sophocles himself in the *Ajax* and the *Antigone*. It happened at times, it is true, during the Peloponnesian War, and it is always regarded as barbaric.

No, this is no justification of Electra. Sophocles is often concerned with the power of hate—in the *Ajax*, the *Trachiniae*, the *Philoctetes*, and the *Oedipus at Colonus*. The *Electra* is a play about the power of hate and misery bred in a particular personality which finally seems to lose the natural power to create. The girl cannot live spontaneously. Her life is a series of responses—of hate for ill treatment, of love and hope for the fulfilment of revenge. The events of the years gone by shape everything else, to the elimination of any sense of the immediate present, except as the continuation of the past. The *Electra* is perhaps the best-constructed and most unpleasant play that Sophocles wrote. The tightness and cogency of the plot go together with the absence of nobility and magnitude in the chief character in a way which never occurred again in the extant plays. For sheer clarity and power, its author probably never improved on it.

ELECTRA

CHARACTERS

Paedagogus, the Old Servant Who Looked after Orestes when a Boy

Orestes, Son of Agamemnon, Murdered King of Mycenae

Electra, Daughter of Agamemnon

Chorus of Women of Mycenae

Chrysothemis, Sister of Electra

Clytemnestra, Widow of Agamemnon and Wife of Aegisthus

Aegisthus, Usurping King of Mycenae

ELECTRA

SCENE: *Before the royal palace in Mycenae.*

Paedagogus

Son of Agamemnon, once general at Troy,
now you are here, now you can see it all,
all that your heart has always longed for.
This is old Argos of your yearning, the grove
of Inachus' gadfly-haunted daughter.
And here, Orestes, is the Lycean market place
of the wolf-killing God. Here on the left
the famous temple of Hera. Where we have come now,
believe your eyes, see golden Mycenae,
and here the death-heavy house of the Pelopidae.

10

Once on a time, your father's murder fresh,
I took you from this house, received you from the hand
of your sister, whose blood and father were yours.
I saved you then. I have raised you from that day
to this moment of your manhood to be the avenger
of that father done to death. Orestes, now,
and you, Pylades, dearest friend, take counsel
quickly on what to do. Already the sunlight,
brightening, stirs dawning bird song into clearness,
and the black, kindly night of stars is gone.
Before a man leaves his house, sets foot on the path,
let us hold our parley. We are where
we must not shrink. It is high time for action.

20

Orestes

Dearest of servants:
very plain are the signs you show of your nobility
toward me. It is so with a horse of breeding.
Even in old age, hard conditions
do not break his spirit. His ears are still erect.

So it is with you. You urge me, and yourself
follow among the first Therefore, I will make plain
all my determinations. Give keen ear
to what I say, and where I miss the mark
of what I should, correct me.

30

When I came to Pytho's place of prophecy
to learn to win revenge
for my father's murder on those that did that murder,
Phoebus spoke to me the words I tell you now:
"Take not spear nor shield nor host;
go yourself, and craft of hand
be yours to kill, with justice but with stealth."
Now we have heard the oracle together
Go you into this house when occasion calls you.
Know all that is done there, and, knowing, report
clear news to us. You are old. It's a long time.
They will never know you. They will not suspect you
with your gray silver hair. Here is your story.
You are a stranger coming from Phanoteus,
their Phocian friend, the greatest of their allies.
Tell them a sudden accident befell
Orestes, and he's dead Swear it on oath.
Say in the Pythian games he was rolled
out of his chariot at high speed.
That is your story now.

40

50

We shall go first to my father's grave
and crown it, as he bade us, with libations
and with cuttings from my thick, luxuriant hair.
And then we shall come here again
and in our hands a carved bronze-sided urn,
the urn that you know I hid here in the bushes.
By these means we shall bring the pleasant news
with our tale of lies, that here is my body,
quite gone to ashes, charred and burned, before them.

For why should it irk me if I die in word
 but in deed come through alive and win my glory?
 To my thinking, no word is base when spoken with profit
 Before now I have seen wise men often
 dying empty deaths as far as words reported them,
 and then, when they have come to their homes again,
 they have been honored more, even to the skies.
 So in my case I venture to predict
 that I who die according to this rumor
 shall, like a blazing star, glare on my foes again

60

Land of my father, Gods of my country,
 welcome me, grant me success in my coming,
 and you, too, house of my father;
 as your purifier I have come,
 in justice sent by the Gods.
 Do not send me dishonored out of this country,
 but rich from of old time, restorer of my house.
 This is all that I have to say Old man,
 let it be yours to go and mind your task
 We two must go away. It is seasonable,
 and seasonableness is greatest master of every act.

70

Electra (from inside the house cries out)
 Ah! Ah!

Paedagogus

Inside the house some one of the servants,
 I think, is crying.

Orestes

Might it not be
 unfortunate Electra? Do you want us
 to stay here and to listen to her cries?

80

Paedagogus

No. Nothing must come before we try
 to carry out what Loxias has bidden us.
 From there we must make our beginning,

pouring the lustral offerings for your father.
For that, I think, will bring us victory,
and mastery in our enterprise.

(*Orestes and his friends withdraw; Electra emerges*)

Electra

O Holy Light
and air, copartner with light in earth's possession,
how many keening dirges,
how many plangent strokes
laid on the breast till the breast was bloody,
have you heard from me
when the darkling night withdrew?
And again in the house of my misery
my bed is witness to my all-night sorrowing
dirges for my unhappy father.
Him in the land of the foreigner
no murderous god of battles entertained.
But my mother and the man who shared her bed,
Aegisthus, split his head with a murderous ax,
like woodsmen with an oak tree
For all this no pity was given him,
by any but me, no pity for your death,
father, so pitiful, so cruel.
But, for my part, I
will never cease my dirges and sorrowful laments,
as long as I have eyes to see
the twinkling light of the stars and this daylight.
So long, like a nightingale, robbed of her young,
here before the doors of what was my father's house
I shall cry out my sorrow for all the world to hear.

90

100

House of the Death God, house of Persephone,
Hermes of the Underworld, holy Curse,
Furies the Dread Ones, children of the Gods,
all ye who look upon those who die unjustly,
all ye who look upon the theft of a wife's love,

110

come all and help take vengeance for my father,
for my father's murder!
And send me my brother to my aid.
For alone to bear the burden I am no longer strong enough,
the burden of the grief that weighs against me.

120

Chorus

Electra, child of the wretchedest of mothers,
why with ceaseless lament do you waste away
sorrowing for one long dead,
Agamemnon, godlessly trapped
by deceits of your treacherous mother,
betrayed by her evil hand?
May evil be the end
of him that contrived the deed,
if I may lawfully say it!

Electra

True-hearted girls,
you have come to console me in my troubles.
I know, I understand what you say,
nothing of it escapes me.
But, all the same, I will not
leave my mourning for my poor father.
You whose love responds to mine in all ways,
suffer me my madness,
I entreat you.

130

Chorus

But from the all-receptive lake
of Death you shall not raise him,
groan and pray as you will.
If past the bounds of sense you dwell in grief
that is cureless, with sorrow unending,
you will only destroy yourself,
in a matter where the evil knows no deliverance.
It is only your discomfort.
Why do you seek it?

140

Electra

Simple indeed is the one
that forgets parents pitifully dead.
Suited rather to my heart
the bird of mourning
that "Itys, Itys" ever does lament,
the bird of crazy sorrow, Zeus's messenger.
And Niobe, that suffered all, you, too,
I count God
who weeps perpetually
in her rocky grave.

150

Chorus

Not alone to you, my child,
this burden of grief has come.
You exceed in your feeling far
those of your kin and blood.
See the life of Chrysothemis
and Iphianassa,
and that one whose manhood grows in secret,
sorrowing, a prince,
whom one day this famed land of noble Mycenae
shall welcome back, if God will bless his coming,
Orestes.

160

Electra

I have awaited him always
sadly, unweariedly,
till I'm past childbearing,
till I am past marriage,
always to my own ruin.
Wet with tears, I endure
an unending doom of misfortune.
But he has forgotten
what he has suffered, what he has known.
What message comes from him to me
that is not again belied?

170

Yes, he is always longing to come,
but he does not choose to come, for all his longing.

Chorus

Take heart, take heart, my child
Still great above is Zeus,
who oversees all things in sovereign power
Confide to him your overbitter wrath.
Chafe not overmuch against
the foes you hate, nor yet forget them quite,
for Time is a kindly God.
For neither he that lives
by Crisa's cattle-grazing shore,
the son of Agamemnon, will be heedless,
nor the God that rules by Acheron's waters

180

Electra

But for me already the most of my life
has gone by without hope
And I have no strength any more
I am one wasted in childlessness,
with no loving husband for champion.
Like some dishonored foreigner,
I tenant my father's house in these ugly rags
and stand at a scanty table.

190

Chorus

Pitiful was the cry at the homecoming,
and pitiful, when on your father on his couch
the sharp biting stroke of the brazen ax
was driven home.
Craft was the contriver, passion the killer,
dreadfully begetting between them a Shape,
dreadful, whether divine or human,
was he that did this.

200

Electra

That day of all days that have ever been
most deeply my enemy.

O night, horrible burden
of that unspeakable banquet.
Shameful death that my father saw
dealt him by the hands of the two,
hands that took my own life captive,
betrayed, destroyed me utterly.
For these deeds may God in his greatness,
the Olympian one, grant punishment to match them.
And may they have no profit of their glory
who brought these actions to accomplishment.

210

Chorus

Take heed you do not speak too far.
Do you not see from what
acts of yours you suffer as you do?
To destruction self-inflicted
you fall so shamefully.
You have won for yourself
superfluity of misfortune,
breeding wars in your sullen soul
evermore. You cannot fight
such conflicts hand to hand, with mighty princes.

220

Electra

Terrors compelled me,
to terrors I was driven.
I know it, I know my own spirit.
With terrors around me, I will not hold back
these mad cries of misery, so long as I live.
For who, dear girls, who that thought right
would believe there were suitable comforting
words for me?
Forbear, forbear, my comforters.
These ills of mine shall be called cureless
and never shall I give over my sorrow,
and the number of my dirges none shall tell.

230

Chorus

But only in good will to you I speak
like some loyal mother, entreating
not to breed sorrow from sorrow.

Electra

What is the natural measure of my sorrow?
Come, how when the dead are in question,
can it be honorable to forget?
In what human being is this instinctive?
Never may I have honor of such,
nor, if I dwell with any good thing, 240
may I live at ease, by restraining
the wings of shrill lament to my father's dishonor.
For if he that is dead
is earth and nothing,
poorly lying,
and they shall never in their turn
pay death for death in justice,
then shall all shame be dead
and all men's piety. 250

Chorus

My child, it was with both our interests at heart
I came, both yours and mine. If what I say
is wrong, have your own way. We will obey you.

Electra

Women, I am ashamed if I appear
to you too much the mourner with constant dirges.
What I do, I must do. Pardon me. I ask you
how else would any well-bred girl behave
that saw her father's wrongs, as I have seen these,
by day and night, always, on the increase
and never a check? 260
First there's my mother, yes, my mother, now become
all hatred. Then in the house I live with those
who murdered my father. I am their subject, and

whether I eat or go without depends
on them.

What sort of days do you imagine
I spend, watching Aegisthus sitting
on my father's throne, watching him wear
my father's self-same robes, watching him
at the hearth where he killed him, pouring libations?
Watching the ultimate act of insult,
my father's murderer in my father's bed
with my wretched mother—if mother I should call her,
this woman that sleeps with him.

270

She is so daring that she paramours
this foul, polluted creature and fears no Fury.
No, as though laughing at what was done,
she has found out the day on which she killed
my father in her treachery, and on that day
has set a dancing festival and sacrifices
sheep, in monthly ritual, "to the Gods that saved her."
So within that house I see, to my wretchedness,
the accursed feast named in his honor.

280

I see it, moan, and waste away, lament—
but only to myself. I may not even cry
as much as my heart would have me.
For this woman, all nobility in words,
abuses me: "You hateful thing, God-hated,
are you the only one whose father is dead?
Is there no one else of human kind in mourning?"

290

My curse upon you! May the Gods below
grant you from your present sorrows no release!"
Such is the tone of her insults, unless she hears
from someone of Orestes' coming. Then
she grows really wild and stands beside me shrieking:
"Are you too not responsible for this?
Is not this your doing, you who stole
Orestes from these hands of mine, conveying him
away? But you may be sure you will pay for it

and pay enough " She howls so, and nearby her
 is her distinguished bridegroom, saying the same,
 that utter dastard, mischief complete,
 who makes his wars with women
 But I am waiting for Orestes' coming,
 waiting forever for the one who will stop
 all our wrongs. I wait and wait and die.
 For his eternal going-to-do-something
 destroys my hopes, possible and impossible.

300

In such a state, my friends, one cannot
 be moderate and restrained nor pious either.
 Evil is all around me, evil
 is what I am compelled to practice.

Chorus

Tell me, as you talk like this, is Aegisthus here,
 or is he gone from home?

310

Electra

Certainly, he's gone
 Do not imagine, if he were near, that I
 would wander outside. Now he is on his estate.

Chorus

If so, I can talk with you with better heart.

Electra

For the present, he is away. What do you want?

Chorus

Tell me: what of your brother? Is he really coming
 or hesitating? That is what I want to know.

Electra

He says he is—but does nothing of what he says.

Chorus

A man often hesitates when he does a big thing.

320

Electra

I did not hesitate when rescuing him.

Chorus

Be easy.

He's a true gentleman and will help his friends.

Electra

I believe in him, or else had not lived so long.

Chorus

Say no more now. I see your sister,
blood of your blood, of the same father and mother,
Chrysothemis, in her hands burial offerings,
the usual sacrifice to the Gods below.

(*Enter Chrysothemis, Electra's sister.*)

Chrysothemis

What have you come to say out of doors,
sister? Will you never learn, in all this time,
not to give way to your empty anger?
Yet this much I know, and know my own heart, too,
that I am sick at what I see, so that
if I had strength, I would let them know how I feel.
But under pain of punishment, I think,
I must make my voyage with lowered sails,
that I may not seem to do something and then prove
ineffectual. But justice, justice,
is not on my side but on yours. If I am
to live and not as a prisoner, I must
in all things listen to my lords.

330

340

Electra

It is strange indeed that you who were born
of our father should forget him
and heed your mother. All these warnings
of me you have learned from her. Nothing is your own.
Now you must make your choice, one way or the other,
either to be a fool
or sensible—and to forget your friends.
Here you are saying: "If I had the strength,

I would show my hatred of them!" You who, when I
 did everything to take vengeance for my father,
 never did a thing to help—yes, discouraged the doer. 350
 'Is not this cowardice on top of baseness? /
 Tell me, or let me tell you, what benefit
 I would achieve by giving up my mourning?
 Do I not live? Yes, I know, badly, but
 for me enough. And I hurt them
 and so give honor to the dead, if there is, there
 in that other world, anything that brings pleasure.
 But you who hate, you tell me, hate in word only
 but in fact live with our father's murderers.

I tell you: never, not though they brought me your gifts
 in which you now feel pride, would I yield to them. 360
 Have your rich table and your abundant life.
 All the food I need is the quiet of my conscience.
 I do not want to win your honor.
 nor would you if you were sound of mind. Now, when you could
 be called the daughter of the best of fathers,
 be called your mother's. Thus to most people prove base,
 traitor to your dead father and your friends.

Chorus

No anger, I entreat you. In the words of both
 there is value for both, if you, Electra, can 370
 follow her advice and she take yours.

Chrysothemis

O ladies, I am used to her and her words.
 I never would have mentioned this, had not
 I learned of the greatest of misfortunes coming
 her way to put a stop to her long mourning.

Electra

Tell me of your terror. If you can speak to me
 of something worse than this condition of mine,
 I'll not refuse it still.

Chrysothemis

Well, I shall tell you.

From what I learned—and if you don't give over
your present mourning—they will send you where
never a gleam of sun shall visit you.

380

You shall live out your life in an underground cave
and there bewail sorrows of the world outside.

With this in mind, reflect. And do not blame me
later when you are suffering.

Now is a good time to take thought.

Electra

So this is what they have decided to do with me.

Chrysothemis

Yes, this exactly, when Aegisthus comes home.

Electra

As far as this goes, let him come home soon.

Chrysothemis

Why such a prayer for evil, my poor darling?

Electra

That he may come—if he will do what you say.

Chrysothemis

Hoping that *what* may happen you? Are you crazy?

390

Electra

That I may get away from you all, as far as I can.

Chrysothemis

Have you no care of this, your present life?

Electra

Mine is indeed a fine life, to be envied.

Chrysothemis

It might be, if you could learn common sense.

Electra

Do not teach me falseness to those I love.

Chrysothemis

That, that is not what I teach, but to yield to authority.

Electra

Practice your flattery. This is not my way.

Chrysothemis

It is a good thing, though, not to fall through stupidity.

Electra

I shall fall, if I must, revenging my father.

Chrysothemis

My father will have pardon for me, I know.

400

Electra

These are words that the base may praise.

Chrysothemis

You will not heed me then? You will not agree?

Electra

No, certainly.

May I not yet be so empty-witted.

Chrysothemis

Then I must go on the errand I was bid.

Electra

Where are you going? To whom
bringing burnt offering?

Chrysothemis

My mother sent me with offerings for father's grave.

Electra

What are you saying? To her greatest enemy?

Chrysothemis

"Whom she has killed"—you would add.

Electra

Which of her friends persuaded her? Who thought of this?

Chrysothemis

I think it was night terrors drove her to it.

410

Electra

Gods of my father, now or never stand my friends!

Chrysothemis

Why do "night terrors" make you confident?

Electra

I'll tell you that when you tell me the dream.

Chrysothemis

I cannot tell you much, only a little.

Electra

Tell me it, all the same. Often this little
has made or ruined men.

Chrysothemis

There is a story that she saw my father,
the father that was yours and mine, again
coming to life, once more to live with her.
He took and at the hearth planted the scepter
which once he bore and now Aegisthus bears,
and up from out the scepter foliage sprang
luxuriantly, and shaded all the land
of this Mycenae. This is what I heard
from someone present when she told the Sun
the nature of her dreams.

420

But beyond this

I know no more, only that she sends me
because of her fear. And, by the Gods, I pray you,
the Gods that live in this country, listen to me
and do not fall out of stupidity.
For if you should reject me, she will come
again to harry you with punishment.

430

Electra

My dear one, not a morsel that you hold
allow to touch that grave, no, nothing.

It would not be God's law nor pious that you
should offer to my father sacrifices
and lustral offerings from that enemy woman.
Throw them to the winds! Or hide them in deep hollowed
earth, somewhere where no particle of them
may ever reach my father where he lies.

But let them be stored up for her as treasures
below, against the day when *she* shall die.

I tell you, if she were not the most brazen
of all of womankind, would she have dared
to pour these enemy libations
over the body of the man she killed?

440

Consider if you think that the dead man,
as he lies in his grave, will welcome kindly
these offerings from her by whom he was robbed
of life and honor? By whom, mutilated?

And for her purification she wiped
the blood stains on his head? Can you believe
that these will prove for her a quittance offering?

No, no. You let them be. You cut a lock
out of your own hair, from the fringe and mine,
mine, too, his wretched daughter's. Such a small offering,
yet all I have! Give it to him, this lustrous
lock of hair, and here, my girdle, unadorned.

450

Kneel then and pray that from that nether world
he may come, a friendly spirit, to our help
against his enemies. Pray that the boy Orestes
may live to fight and win against his enemies,
may live to set his foot upon them.

And so
in days to come we shall be able to dress
this grave with richer hands than we can now.
I think, oh yes, I think that it was he
that thought to send this evil-boding dream
to her.

460

Yet, sister, do yourself this service

that never, never shall we see
 such a portent draw near without hurt
 to doers and partners in crime.
 There are no prophecies for mortal men
 in dreadful dreams and soothsayings
 if this night vision come not,
 well and truly to fulfilment.

500

Horsemanship of Pelops of old,
 loaded with disaster,
 how deadly you have proved
 to this land!
 For since the day that Myrtilus
 fell asleep, sunk in the sea,
 wrecked utterly with the unhappy
 wreck of his golden carriage,
 for never a moment since
 has destruction and ruin
 ever left this house.

510

(Queen Clytemnestra enters from the palace.)

Clytemnestra

It seems you are loose again, wandering about.
 Aegisthus isn't here, who always restrains you
 from going abroad and disgracing your family.
 But now that he is away you pay no heed
 to me, although there's many a one you have told
 at length how brutally and how unjustly
 I lord it over you, insulting
 you and yours.

520

There is no insolence in myself,
 but being abused by you so constantly
 I give abuse again.

Your father, yes,
 always your father. Nothing else is your pretext—
 the death he got from me. From me. I know it,
 well. There is no denial in me. Justice,

Justice it was that took him, not I alone.

You would have served the cause of Justice if
you had been right-minded.

For this your father whom you always mourn,
alone of all the Greeks, had the brutality
to sacrifice your sister to the Gods,
although he had not toiled for her as I did,
the mother that bore her, he the begetter only.
Tell me, now, why he sacrificed her. Was it
for the sake of the Greeks?

530

They had no share in my daughter to let them kill her.
Was it for Menelaus' sake, his brother,
that he killed my child? And shall he not then pay for it?
Had not this Menelaus two children who
ought to have died rather than mine? It was their parents
for whose sake all the Greeks set sail for Troy.
Or had the God of Death some longing to feast
on my children rather than hers? Or had
that accursed father lost the love of mine
and felt it still for Menelaus' children?
This was the act of a father thoughtless
or with bad thoughts. That is how I see it
even if you differ with me.

540

The dead girl,
if she could speak, would bear me out.
I am not dismayed by all that has happened.
If you think me wicked, keep your righteous judgment
and blame your neighbors.

550

Electra

This is one time you will not be able to say
that the abuse I receive from you was provoked
by something painful on my side.

But if
you will allow me I will speak truthfully
on behalf of the dead man and my dead sister.

Clytemnestra

Of course, I allow you. If you had always begun
our conversations so, you would not have been
so painful to listen to.

Electra

I will tell you, then.

You say you killed my father. What claim more shameful
than that, whether with justice or without it?
But I'll maintain that it was not with justice
you killed him, but the seduction of that bad man,
with whom you now are living, drew you to it.
Ask Artemis the Huntress what made her hold
the many winds in check at Aulis. Or
I'll tell you this. *You* dare not learn from her.

560

My father, as I hear, when at his sport,
started from his feet a horned dappled stag
within the Goddess' sanctuary. He
let fly and hit the deer and uttered some boast
about his killing of it. The daughter of Leto
was angry at this and therefore stayed the Greeks
in order that my father, to compensate
for the beast killed, might sacrifice his daughter.

570

Thus was her sacrifice—no other deliverance
for the army either homeward or toward Ilium.
He struggled and fought against it. Finally,
constrained, he killed her—not for Menelaus.
But if—I will plead in your own words—he had done so
for his brother's sake, is that any reason
why he should die at your hands? By what law?
If this is the law you lay down for men, take heed
you do not lay down for yourself ruin and repentance.
If we shall kill one in another's requital,
you would be the first to die, if you met with justice.

580

No. Think if the whole is not a mere excuse.
Please tell me for what cause you now commit
the ugliest of acts—in sleeping with him,
the murderer with whom you first conspired
to kill my father, and breed children to him, and
your former honorable children born
of honorable wedlock you drive out.

590

What grounds for praise shall I find in this? Will you say
that this, too, is retribution for your daughter?
If you say it, still your act is scandalous.
It isn't decent to marry with your enemies
even for a daughter's sake.

But I may not
even rebuke you! What you always say
is that it is my mother I am reviling.
Mother! I do not count you mother of mine,
but rather a mistress. My life is wretched
because I live with multitudes of sufferings,
inflicted by yourself and your bedfellow.
But the other, he is away, he has escaped
your hand, though barely. Sad Orestes now
wears out his life in misery and exile.
Many a time you have accused me
of rearing him to be your murderer.
I would have done it if I could. Know that.
As far as that goes, you may publicly
proclaim me what you like—traitor, reviler,
a creature full of shamelessness.

600

If I am
naturally skilled as such, I do no shame
to the nature of the mother that brought me forth.

Chorus

I see she is angry, but whether it is in justice,
I no longer see how I shall think of that.

610

Clytemnestra

What need have I of thought in her regard
who so insults her mother, when a grown woman?
Don't you think she will go to any lengths, so shameless
as she is?

Electra

You may be sure I am ashamed,
although you do not think it. I know why
I act so wrongly, so unlike myself.
The hate you feel for me and what you do
compel me against my will to act as I do.
For ugly deeds are taught by ugly deeds.

620

Clytemnestra

O vile and shameless, I and my words and deeds
give you too much talk.

Electra

It is you who talk, not I. It is your deeds,
and it is deeds invent the words.

Clytemnestra

Now by the Lady Artemis you shall not escape
the results of your behavior, when Aegisthus comes.

Electra

You see? You let me say what I please, and then
you are outraged. You do not know how to listen.

Clytemnestra

Hold your peace at least. Allow me sacrifice,
since I have permitted you to say all you will.

630

Electra

I allow you, yes, I bid you, sacrifice.
Do not blame my lips; for I will say no more.

Clytemnestra (to the maid)

Come, do you lift them up, the offerings

of all the fruits of earth, that to this King here
I may offer my prayers for freedom from my fears.

(*She speaks to the image of Apollo.*)

Phoebus Protector, hear me, as I am,
although the word I speak is muted. Not among friends
is it spoken, nor may I unfold the whole
to the light while this girl stands beside me,
lest with her chattering tongue, wagging in malice,
she sow in all the city bad reports.

640

Yet hear me as I speak. So I will put it:
the dreams of double meaning I have seen
within this night, for them, Lycaean King,
grant what is good in them prosperous issue
but what is ill, turn it again upon
those that do us ill.

If there are some that from my present wealth
plot to expel me with their stratagems,
do not permit them. Let me live out my life,
just as my life is now, to the end uninjured,
controlling the house of Atreus and the throne,
living with those I love as I do now,
the good days on our side, and with such children
as do not hate me nor cause bitter pain.

650

These are my prayers, Lycaean Apollo, hear them
graciously. Grant to all of us what we ask.
For all the rest, although I am silent,
I know you are a God and know it all.
It is natural that the children of Zeus see all.

(*Enter Paedagogus.*)

Paedagogus

Foreign ladies, how may I know for certain,
is this the palace of the King Aegisthus?

660

Chorus

This is it, sir. Your own guess is correct.

Paedagogus

Would I then be right in thinking this lady
his wife? She has indeed a royal look.

Chorus

Quite right. Here she is for you, herself.

Paedagogus

Greetings, your Majesty. I come with news,
pleasant news for you and Aegisthus and your friends.

Clytemnestra

I welcome what you have said. I would like first
to know who sent you here.

Paedagogus

The Phocian,
Phanoteus, charging me with a grave business.

670

Clytemnestra

What is it, sir? Please tell me. I know well
you come from a friend and will speak friendly words.

Paedagogus

Orestes is dead. There it is, in one short word.

Electra

O God, O God! This is the day I die.

Clytemnestra

What is this you say, sir, what? Don't listen to her.

Paedagogus

What I said and say now is "Orestes is dead."

Electra

God help me, I am dead—I cannot live now.

Clytemnestra

Leave her to herself. Sir, will you tell me the truth,
in what way did he meet his death?

Paedagogus

This
I was sent to tell, and I will tell you it all.

680

He went to the glorious gathering that Greece holds
in honor of the Delphic Games, and when
he heard the herald's shrill proclamation
for the first contest—it was a running race—
he entered glorious, all men's eyes upon him.
His running was as good as his appearance.
He won the race and came out covered with honor.
There is much I could tell you, but I must tell it briefly.
I do not know a man of such achievement
or prowess. Know this one thing. In all the contests
the marshals announced, he won the prize, was cheered,
proclaimed the victor as "Argive by birth,
by name Orestes, son of the general
Agamemnon who once gathered the great Greek host."
So much for that. But when a God sends mischief,
not even the strong man may escape.

690

Orestes,

when, the next day, at sunset, there was a race
for chariot teams, entered with many contestants.
There was one Achaean, one from Sparta, two
Libyans, masters in driving racing teams.
Orestes was the fifth among them. He
had as his team Thessalian mares. The sixth
was an Aetolian with young sorrel horses.
The seventh was a Magnesian, and the eighth
an Aenean, by race, with a white team.
The ninth competitor came from God-built Athens,
and then a Boeotian, ten chariots in all.
They stood in their allotted stations where
the appointed judges placed them. At the signal,
a brazen trumpet, they were off. The drivers
cheered their horses on, their hands vibrating the reins,
all together. All the course was filled
with the noise of rattling chariots. Clouds of dust
rose up. The mass of drivers, huddled together,
did not spare the goad as each one struggled

700

710

to put the nave of his wheel or the snorting mouths
of his horses past his rival, wheels and backs
of the foremost drivers all beslobbered with foam, 720
as the breath of the teams behind beat on them.

So far all chariots were uninjured. Then
the Aenean's hard-mouthed colts got out of hand
and bolted as they finished the sixth lap
and turned into the seventh. There they crashed
head on with the Barcaean. After that,
from this one accident, team crashed team
and upset each other. All the plain
of Crisa was full of wrecks. But the man from Athens, 730
a clever driver, saw what was happening, pulled
his horses out of the way and held them in check,
letting past the disordered mass of teams in the middle
Orestes had been driving last and holding
his horses back, putting his trust in the finish.

But when he saw the Athenian left alone,
he sent a shrill cry through his good horses' ears
and set to catch him. The two drove level,
the poles were even. First one, now the other,
would push his horses' heads in front. 740

Orestes always drove tight at the corners
barely grazing the edge of the post with his wheel,
loosing his hold of the trace horse on his right
while he checked the near horse. In his other laps
the poor young man and his horses had come through safe.

But this time he let go of the left rein
as the horse was turning. Unaware, he struck the edge
of the pillar and broke his axle in the center.
He was himself thrown from the rails of the chariot
and tangled in the reins. As he fell, the horses
bolted wildly to the middle of the course.
When the crowd saw him fallen from his car,
they shuddered. "How young he was," "How gallant his deeds," 750
and "How sadly he has ended," as they saw him

thrown earthward now, and then, tossing his legs
to the sky—until at last the grooms
with difficulty stopped the runaway team
and freed him, but so covered with blood that no one
of his friends could recognize the unhappy corpse.
They burned him on the pyre. Then men of Phocis
chosen for the task have brought here in a small urn
the lamentable ashes—all that is left
of this great frame, that he may have his grave
here in his father's country.

760

That is my story,
bitter as stories go, but for us who saw it,
greatest of all ill luck these eyes beheld.

Chorus

Woe, woe. The ancient family
of our lords has perished, it seems, root and branch.

Clytemnestra

Zeus, what shall I say? Shall I say "good luck"
or "terrible, but for the best"? Indeed,
my state is terrible if I must save
my life by the misfortunes of myself.

Paedagogus

My lady, why does this story make you dejected?

Clytemnestra

Mother and child! It is a strange relation.
A mother cannot hate the child she bore
even when injured by it.

770

Paedagogus

Our coming here, it seems, then is to no purpose.

Clytemnestra

Not to no purpose. How can you say "no purpose"?—
if you have come with certain proofs of death
of one who from my soul was sprung,
but severed himself from my breast, from my nurture, who

became an exile and a foreigner;
 who when he quitted this land, never saw me again;
 who charged me with his father's murder, threatened
 terrors against me. Neither night nor day
 could I find solace in sleep. Time, supervisor,
 conducted me to inevitable death.

780

But now, with this one day I am freed from fear
 of her and him. She was the greater evil;
 she lived with me, constantly draining
 the very blood of life—now perhaps I'll have peace
 from her threats. The light of day will come again.

Electra

My God! My God! Now must I mourn indeed
 your death, Orestes, when your mother here
 pours insults on you, dead. Can this be right?

790

Clytemnestra

Not right for you. But he is right as he is.

Electra

Hear, Nemesis, of the man that lately died!

Clytemnestra

She has heard those she should and done all well.

Electra

Insult us now. For now the luck is yours.

Clytemnestra

Will you not stop this, you and Orestes both?

Electra

We are stopped indeed. We cannot make you stop.

Clytemnestra (to the messenger)

Your coming will be worth much, sir, if you
 have stopped my daughter's never ceasing clamor.

Paedagogus (with a feint at departure)

Well, I will go now, if all this is settled.

Clytemnestra

O no! I should do wrong to myself and to
the friend who sent you if I let you go.
Please go inside. Leave her out here to wail
the misfortunes of herself and those she loves.

800

(Clytemnestra and the assumed messenger go into the house.)

Electra

There's an unhappy mother for you! See
how agonized, how bitter, were the tears,
how terribly she sorrowed for her son
that met the death you heard of! No, I tell you,
she parted from us laughing. O my God!
Orestes darling, your death is my death.
By your passing you have torn away from my heart
whatever solitary hope still lingered
that you would live and come some day to avenge
your father and my miserable self
But now where should I turn? I am alone,
having lost both you and my father. Back again
to be a slave among those I hate most
of all the world, my father's murderers!
Is this what is right for me?

810

No, this I will not—
live with them any more. Here, at the gate
I will abandon myself to waste away
this life of mine, unloved. If they're displeased,
let someone kill me, someone that lives within.
Death is a favor to me, life an agony.
I have no wish for life.

820

Chorus

Where are Zeus's thunderbolts?
Where is the glowing sun?
If they see this and hide it
and hold their peace?

Electra (cries out)

Oh!

Chorus

Why do you cry, child?

Electra (cries again)

Oh!

Chorus

Speak no great word.

830

Electra

You will destroy me.

Chorus

How?

Electra

If you suggest a hope
when all is plain, when they are all gone
to the house of Death, and when I waste
my life away, you tread me further down.

Chorus

King Amphiaraus, as I know,
was caught in woman's golden snares
and now beneath the earth
reigns over all the spirits there.

Electra

Oh! Oh!

840

Chorus

Alas indeed, for pitiably

Electra

he died.

Chorus

Yes.

Electra

I know, I know. For him in sorrow
there came a deliverer.

None such for me. For one there was,
but he is gone, ravished by death.

Chorus

Unhappy girl, unhappiness is yours!

Electra

I bear you witness with full knowledge.
Knowledge too full, bred of a life,
the crowded months surging with horrors
many and dreadful!

850

Chorus

We know what you mean.

Electra

So do not then, I pray you,
divert my thoughts to where . . .

Chorus

What do you mean?

Electra

. . . there is no hope, no kinsfolk,
and none among the nobles that will help.

Chorus

Death is the common lot of death-born men.

860

Electra

Yes, but to meet it so,
as he did, poor darling,
tangled in the leather reins,
among the wild competing hoofs.

Chorus

None can guess whence death will come.

Electra

True indeed. He is now a stranger
that was hidden in earth, by no hand of mine,
knew no grave I gave him,
knew no keening from me.

870

(Enter Chrysothemis.)

Chrysothemis

My darling,
I am so glad, I have run here in haste,
regardless of propriety. I bring you
happiness and a relief from all
the troubles you have had and sorrowed for.

Electra

Where could you find a cure—and who are you
to find it—for my troubles which know no cure?

Chrysothemis

We have Orestes here among us—that is
my news for you—as plain as you see myself.

Electra

Are you mad, poor girl, or can it be you laugh
at what are your own troubles as well as mine?

880

Chrysothemis

I swear by our father's hearth. It is not in mockery
I speak. He is here in person with us.

Electra

Ah!

Wretched girl! Who told you this that you believed him,
too credulous?

Chrysothemis

My own eyes were the evidence
for what I saw, and no one else.

Electra

Poor thing!

Poor thing! What proof was there to see? What did you
see that has set your heart incurably
afire?

Chrysothemis

I pray you, hear me by the Gods,
and having heard me, call me sane or foolish.

890

Electra

Tell me, then, if the story gives you pleasure.

Chrysothemis

Yes, I will tell you all I saw.

When I came to our father's ancient grave,
I saw that from the very top of the mound
newly spilled rills of milk were flowing. Round
the coffin was a wreath of all the flowers
that grow. I saw in wonder, looked about
for someone who would be near me. When I saw
that all was quiet, I approached the grave. 900
At the top of the pyre there was a lock of hair;
as soon as I saw that, something jumped within me
at the familiar sight. I know I saw
the token of my dearest, loved Orestes
I took it in my hands, never saying a word
for fear of saying what would be ill-omened,
but with my joy my eyes were filled with tears.
Both then and now I know with certainty
this offering could come from him alone
Whom else could this concern, save you and me?
I did not do it, I know, and neither did you. 910
How could you? For you cannot leave this house,
even to pray, but they will punish you for it.
Nor can it be our mother She is not inclined
to do such things, nor, doing them, to be secret.
These offerings at the grave must be Orestes'.
Darling, take heart. It is not always the same
Genius that stands by the same people. Till now
he was hateful to us. But now perhaps
this day will seal the promise of much good.

Electra

Oh, how I have been pitying you for your folly!

Chrysothemis

What is this? Do I not say what is to your liking?

Electra

You do not know where you are, nor where your thoughts are.

Chrysothemis

Why should I not have knowledge of what I saw?

Electra

He is dead, my dear Your rescue at his hands
is dead along with him. Look to him no more.

Chrysothemis

Alas! From whom on earth did you hear this?

Electra

From one that was near to him, when he was dying.

Chrysothemis

Where is he then? I am lost in wonderment.

Electra

In the house. He is our mother's welcome guest.

Chrysothemis

Alas again! But who then would have placed
these many offerings on our father's tomb?

930

Electra

I think perhaps that someone put them there
as a remembrance of the dead Orestes.

Chrysothemis

Unlucky I! I was so happy coming,
hurrying to bring my news to you, not knowing
what misery we were plunged in. Now when I've come,
I find both our old sorrow and the new.

Electra

That is how you see it. But now listen to me,
and you can relieve the suffering that weighs on us.

Chrysothemis

How can I bring the dead to life again?

940

Electra

This is not what I mean I am no such fool.

Chrysothemis

What do you bid me do, of which I am capable?

Electra

To have the courage to follow my counsel

Chrysothemis

If I can help at all, I will not refuse

Electra

Look: there is no success without hardship.

Chrysothemis

I see As far as my strength goes, I will help

Electra

Hear me tell you, then, the plans that I have laid.
Friends to stand by and help us we have none—
nowhere—you know that quite as well as I.
Death has taken them and robbed us. We alone,
the two of us, are left.

950

While I still heard my brother flourished,
alive, I had my hopes he would still come,
some day, to avenge the murder of his father
But now that he's no more, I look to you,
that you should not draw back from helping me,
your true-born sister, kill our father's murderer
that killed him with his own hand—Aegisthus.
There is nothing I should now conceal from you.
What are you waiting for, that you are hesitant?
What hope do you look to, that is still standing?
Now you must sorrow for the loss of fortune
that was our father's. Now you must grieve
that you have already so many years
without a marriage and a husband Do not
hope you will get them now. For Aegisthus
is not such a fool to suffer to grow up
children of you and me, clearly to harm him.
But if you follow my plans,

960

first, you will win from that dead father, gone
to the underworld, and from our brother with him,
the recognition of your piety.

And, secondly, as you were born to freedom,
so in the days to come you will be called free
and find a marriage worthy of you; for all
love to look to the noble.

970

Do you not see how great a reputation
you will win yourself and me by doing this?
For who of citizens and foreigners

that sees us will not welcome us with praise:

“These are two sisters, friends. Look on them well.

They saved their father’s house when their foes
were riding high, stood champions against murder,
sparing not to risk their lives upon the venture.

980

Therefore, we all should love them, all revere them,
and all at feasts and public ceremonies
honor these two girls for their bravery.”

This is what everyone will say of us,
in life and death, to our undying fame.

My dear one, hear me. Take sides with your father
and with your brother. Give me deliverance
from what I suffer. Deliver yourself, knowing this:
life on base terms, for the nobly born, is base.

Chorus

In such concerns forethought is an ally
to the one that gives, and her that gets advice.

990

Chrysothemis

Ladies, before she spoke, if she had good sense,
she would have held to prudence, as she has not.

(*To Electra.*)

To what can you look to give you confidence
to arm yourself and call on me to help?

Can you not see? You are a woman—no man.

Your physical strength is less than is your enemies'!
 Their Genius, day by day, grows luckier
 while ours declines and comes to nothingness. 1000
 Who is there, plotting to kill such a man
 as this Aegisthus, would come off unhurt?
 We two are now in trouble. Look to it that
 we do not get ourselves trouble still worse
 if someone hears what you have said.
 There is no gain for us, not the slightest help,
 to win a noble reputation if
 the way to it lies by dishonorable death.
 For death is not the worst but when one wants
 to die and cannot even have that death.
 I beg of you, before you utterly
 destroy us and exterminate our family, 1010
 check your temper. All that you have said to me
 shall be, for my part, unspoken, unfulfilled
 Be sensible, you, and, at long last, being weaker,
 learn to give in to those that have the strength.

Chorus

Give heed to her. No greater gain for man
 than the possession of a sensible mind!

Electra

You have said nothing unexpected. Well
 I knew you would reject what I proposed.
 The deed must then be done by my own hand
 alone. For I will not leave it unfulfilled. 1020

Chrysothemis

Ah!

I would you had felt so when our father died.
 You would have carried all before you.

Electra

I was the same in nature, weaker in judgment.

Chrysothemis

Practice to keep that judgment through your life.

Electra

That is advice which means you will not help me.

Chrysothemis

Yes—for the effort itself implies disaster.

Electra

I envy you your “judgment,” hate your cowardice.

Chrysothemis

I will be equally patient when you praise me.

Electra

That you will never experience from me.

Chrysothemis

There’s a long future to determine that.

1030

Electra

Begone; for there’s no help in you for me.

Chrysothemis

There is, but there’s no learning it in you

Electra

Go and tell all this story to your mother.

Chrysothemis

On my side there is no such hatred as that.

Electra

Understand, at least, how you dishonor me.

Chrysothemis

There is no dishonor, only forethought for you.

Electra

Must I then follow *your* conception of justice?

Chrysothemis

You will think it *ours*, when you come to your senses.

Electra

It is terrible to speak well and be wrong.

Chrysothemis

A very proper description of yourself.

1040

Electra

What! Do you not think that I say what I do with justice?

Chrysothemis

There are times when even justice brings harm with it.

Electra

These are laws by which I would not wish to live

Chrysothemis

If you made your attempt, you would find that I was right

Electra

Yes, I will make it. You will not frighten me

Chrysothemis

Are you sure now? You will not think again?

Electra

No enemy is worse than bad advice.

Chrysothemis

You cannot agree with any of what I say?

Electra

I have made my mind up—and not of yesterday.

Chrysothemis

I will go away then. You cannot bring yourself
to find my words right, nor I your disposition.

1050

Electra

Go then. I will never call you back,
not though you long for it. It would be utter
folly to make so hopeless an attempt.

Chrysothemis

Well, if you think that you are right, go on
thinking so. When you are deep in trouble, then
you may agree with what I said

Chorus

We see above our heads the birds,
true in their wisdom,

caring for the livelihood
of those that gave them life and sustenance.
Why do we not pay our debts so?
By Zeus of the Lightning Bolt,
by Themis, Dweller in Heaven,
not long shall they go unpunished.
O Voice that goes to the dead below,
carry piteous accents,
to the Atridae in the underworld,
and tell of wrongs untouched
by joy of the dance.

1060

Tell them that now their house is sick,
tell them that their two children
fight and struggle, that they cannot
any more live in harmony together.
Electra, betrayed, alone,
is down in the waves of sorrow,
constantly bewailing her father's fate,
like the nightingale lamenting.
She takes no thought of death;
she is ready to leave the light
if only she can kill
the two Furies of her house.
Was there ever one so noble
born of a noble house?

1070

None of the good will choose to live
basely, if so living
they cloud their renown and die nameless.
O my child, my child, even so you
have chosen the common lot of mourning,
have rejected dishonor,
to win at once two reputations
as wise and best of daughters.

1080

I pray that your life may be lifted high

1090

over your foes,
in wealth and power as much as now
you lie beneath their hand.
For I have found you in distress
but winning the highest prize
by piety toward Zeus
for observance of nature's greatest laws.

Orestes (disguised as a Phocian countryman)

I wonder, ladies, if we were directed right
and have come to the destination that we sought?

Chorus

What do you seek? And what do you want here?

1100

Orestes

I have asked all the way here where Aegisthus lives.

Chorus

You have arrived and need not blame your guides

Orestes

Would some one of you be so kind to tell
the household we have come, a welcome company?

Chorus

This lady, nearest you, will bear the message.

Orestes

Then, lady, will you signify within
that certain men of Phocis seek Aegisthus.

Electra

O God, O God, are these the certain proofs
you bring of rumors we had before you came?

Orestes

I do not know about rumor. Old Strophius sent me
here to bring news about Orestes.

1110

Electra

What is it, sir? How fear steals over me!

Orestes

We have the small remains of him in this urn,
this little urn you see us carrying.

Electra

Alas, Alas! This is it indeed, all clear.
Here is my sorrow visible, before me.

Orestes

If you are one that sorrows for Orestes
and his troubles, know this urn contains his body.

Electra

Sir, give it to me, by the Gods If he
is hidden in this urn—give it into my hands,
that I may keen and cry lament together
for myself and all my race with these ashes here.

1120

Orestes (speaking to his men)

Bring it and give it to her, whoever she is
It is not in enmity she asks for it.
One of his friends perhaps, or of his blood.

Electra (speaking to the urn)

Oh, all there is for memory of my love,
my most loved in the world, all that is left
of live Orestes, oh, how differently
from how I sent you forth, how differently
from what I hoped, do I receive you home.
Now all I hold is nothingness,
but you were brilliant when I sent you forth.
Would that you had left life before I sent you
abroad to a foreign country, when I stole you
with these two hands, saved you from being murdered.
Then on that very day you would have died,
have lain there and have found your share,
your common portion, of your father's grave.
Now far from home, an exile, on alien soil

1130

without your sister near, you died unhappily.
 I did not, to my sorrow, wash you with
 the hands that loved you, did not lift you up,
 as was my right, a weight of misery, 1140
 to the fierce blaze of the pyre. The hands of strangers
 gave you due rites, and so you come again,
 a tiny weight inclosed in tiny vessel
 Alas for all my nursing of old days,
 so constant—all for nothing—which I gave you;
 my joy was in the trouble of it. For never
 were you your mother's love as much as mine.
 None was your nurse but I within that household.
 You called me always "sister." Now in one day
 all that is gone—for you are dead. All, all
 you have snatched with you in your going, like 1150
 a hurricane. Our father is dead and gone.
 I am dead in you; and you are dead yourself.
 Our enemies laugh. Frantic with joy, she grows,
 mother, no mother, whom you promised me,
 in secret messages so often, you
 would come to punish. This, all this, the Genius,
 the unlucky Genius of yourself and me,
 has stolen away and sent you back to me,
 instead of the form I loved, only your dust
 and idle shade. Alas! Alas!

(She takes up an attitude of formalized mourning by the urn.)

O body pitiable! Alas! 1160
 O saddest journey that you went, my love,
 and so have ended me! Alas!
 O brother, loved one, you have ended me.
 Therefore, receive me to your habitation,
 nothing to nothing, that with you below
 I may dwell from now on. When you were on earth,
 I shared all with you equally. Now I claim
 in death no less to share a grave with you.
 The dead, I see, no longer suffer pain. 1170

Chorus

Think, Electra, your father was mortal,
and mortal was Orestes. Do not sorrow too much.
This is a debt that all of us must pay.

Orestes

Ah!

What shall I say? What words can I use, perplexed?
I am no longer master of my tongue.

Electra

What ails you? What is the meaning of your words?

Orestes

Is this the distinguished beauty, Electra?

Electra

Yes.

A miserable enough Electra, truly.

Orestes

Alas for this most lamentable event!

Electra

Is it for me, sir, you are sorrowing?

1180

Orestes

Form cruelly and godlessly abused!

Electra

None other than myself must be the subject
of your ill-omened words, sir.

Orestes

O, alas!

For your life without husband or happiness!

Electra

Why do you look at me so, sir? Why lament?

Orestes

How little then I knew of my own sorrows!

Electra

In what of all that was said did you find this out?

Orestes

So great, so sore, I see your sufferings.

Electra

It's little of my suffering that you see.

Orestes

How can there be things worse than those I see?

Electra

Because I live with those that murdered him.

Orestes

Murderers? And whose? Where is the guilt you hint at?

Electra

My father's murderers. I am their slave perforce.

Orestes

Who is it that forces you to such subjection?

Electra

She is called my mother—but like a mother in nothing.

Orestes

How does she force you? Hardship or violence?

Electra

With violence and hardship and all ills.

Orestes

You have none to help you or to hinder her?

Electra

No. There was one. You have shown me his dust.

Orestes

Poor girl! When I look at you, how I pity you.

Electra

Then you are the only one that ever pitied me.

Orestes

Yes. I alone came here and felt your pain.

Electra

You haven't come as, in some way, our kinsman?

Orestes

I will tell—if (*pointing to the Chorus*) I may speak here among friends.

Electra

Yes, friends indeed. You may speak quite freely.

Orestes

Give up this urn then, and you shall know all.

Electra

Don't take it from me, stranger—by the Gods!

Orestes

Do what I bid you. You will not be wrong.

Electra

By your beard! Do not rob me of what I love most!

Orestes

I will not let you have it.

Electra

O Orestes!

Alas, if I may not even give you burial!

1210

Orestes

No words of ill omen! You have no right to mourn.

Electra

Have I no right to mourn for my dead brother?

Orestes

You have no right to call him by that name.

Electra

Am I then so dishonored in his sight?

Orestes

No one dishonors you. Mourning is not for you.

Electra

It is—if I hold Orestes' body here.

Orestes

No body of Orestes—except in fiction.

Electra

Where is the poor boy buried then?

Orestes

Nowhere.

There is no grave for living men.

Electra

How, boy,

What do you mean?

Orestes

Nothing that is untrue.

Electra

Is he alive then?

Orestes

Yes, if I am living.

Electra

And are you he?

Orestes

Look at this signet ring
that was our father's, and know if I speak true.

Electra

O happiest light!

Orestes

Happiest I say, too.

Electra

Voice, have you come?

Orestes

Hear it from no other voice.

Electra

Do my arms hold you?

Orestes

Never again to part.

Electra (to the Chorus)

Dearest of women, fellow citizens,
here is Orestes, that was dead in craft,
and now by craft restored to life again.

Chorus

We see, my child, and at your happy fortune
a tear of gladness trickles from our eyes.

1230

Electra

Child of the body that I loved the best,
at last you have come,
you have come, you have found, you have known those you
yearned for.

Orestes

Yes, I have come.
But bide your time in silence.

Electra

Why?

Orestes

Silence is better, that none inside may hear.

Electra

No, by Artemis, ever virgin.
That I will never stoop to fear—
the women inside there,
always a vain burden on the earth.

1240

Orestes

Yes, but consider that in women too
there lives a warlike spirit. You have proof of it.

Electra

Alas, indeed.
You have awakened my sorrow no cloud can dim,
no expiation wash away,
no forgetfulness overcome,
no measure can fit,
in all its frightfulness.

Orestes

I know that too. But when you may speak freely,
then is the time to remember what was done.

Electra

Every moment, every moment of all time
would fit justly for my complaints.
For hardly now are my lips free of restraint.

Orestes

And I agree. Therefore, hold fast your freedom.

Electra

By doing what?

Orestes

Where there is no occasion,
do not choose to talk too much.

Electra

Who could find a fit bargain
of words for that silence,
now you have appeared?
Past hope, past calculation,
I see you.

1260

Orestes

You see me when the Gods moved me to come.

Electra

You tell me then of a grace surpassing
what I knew before, if in very truth
the Gods have given you to this house.
This I count an action divine.

1270

Orestes

Indeed, I hesitate to check your joy;
only I fear your pleasure may be too great.

Electra

Orestes, you have come at last,
have made the journey worth all the world to me,

have come before me at last.
Now that I see you
after so much sorrow,
do not, I beg you—

Orestes

What should I not do?

Electra

Do not deprive me
of the joy of seeing your face.

Orestes

I would be angry if I saw another
trying to take me from you.

Electra

You agree?

Orestes

Yes.

1280

Electra

My dear one, I have heard you speaking,
the voice I never hoped to hear.
Till now I have held my rage speechless;
I did not cry out when I heard bad news.
But now I have you. You have come,
your darling face before me
that even in suffering I never forgot.

Orestes

Spare me all superfluity of speech.
Tell me not how my mother is villainous,
nor how Aegisthus drains my father's wealth
by luxury or waste. Words about this
will shorten time and opportunity.
But tell me what we need for the present moment,
how openly or hidden we may make
this coming of ours a check for mocking foes.
Take care, you, that our mother may not discover you
by your radiant face, when we two go inside.

1290

Groan as for my destruction, empty
described in words. For when we have reached success,
then you may freely show your joy, and laugh.

1300

Electra

Brother, your pleasure shall be mine. These joys
I have from you. They are not mine to own.
To grieve you, though it were ever so little,
I would not buy a great good for myself.
If I did so, I would not properly
be servant to the Genius who attends us.
You know the situation You have heard
Aegisthus is not at home, our mother is.
Do not be afraid that she will see my face
radiant with smiles. Our hatred is too old.
I am too steeped in it. And since I have seen you,
my tears of joy will still run readily.
How can they cease when on the selfsame day
I have seen you dead and then again alive?
For me your coming is a miracle,
so that if my father should come back to life
I would think it no wonder but believe
I saw him. Since your coming is such for me,
lead as you will. Had I been all alone,
I would not have failed to win one of two things,
a good deliverance or a good death for me.

1310

1320

Orestes

Hush, hush! I hear one of the people within
coming out.

Electra (still loudly to the servants of Orestes)

In with you, friends and guests,
more so, since what you are carrying in is that
which no one will reject there—nor be glad,
once he has got it.

Paedagogus (coming from inside)

Fools and madmen! No
concern for your own lives at all! No sense

to realize that you are not merely near
the deadliest danger, but in its very midst.
If I had not, this while past, stood sentry here
at the door, your plans would now be in the house
before your bodies. I and I only
took the precautions. Have done once and for all
with your long speeches, your insatiate
cries of delight! And in with you at once.
As we are now, delay is ruinous.
It is high time to have done with our task.

1330

Orestes

How shall I find everything inside?

Paedagogus

Well. There is no chance of your recognition.

1340

Orestes

You have announced my death, I understand.

Paedagogus

You are dead and gone—for all your being here.

Orestes

Were they glad of it? Or what did they say?

Paedagogus

I will tell you at the end. As things are now,
all on their side is well—even what is not so.

Electra

Brother, who is this man? I beg you, tell me.

Orestes

Do you not know him?

Electra

I cannot even guess.

Orestes

Do you not know him to whose hands you gave me?

Electra

What, this man?

Orestes

By his hands and by your forethought
I was conveyed away to Phocian country.

1350

Electra

Is this the man, alone among so many,
whom I found loyal when my father was murdered?

Orestes

This is he. There is no need for further questions.

Electra

O light most loved! O only rescuer
of Agamemnon's house, in what a shape
you come again! Are you indeed that other
who saved me and Orestes from many sorrows?
O most loved hands, service of feet most kind!
To think you have stood beside me for so long,
I not to know you, you to give no sign!
You killed me with your words while you had for me
most sweet reality. Bless you, my father,
for in you I think I see my father. Bless you!
Within the selfsame day, of all mankind
I have most hated and loved you most.

1360

Paedagogus

Enough, I think. As for the story
of the happenings in between, there are many days
and nights, as time comes round, to tell you all
clearly, Electra. But as you two stand here
I say to you: now is your chance to act.
Clytemnestra is alone. No man is there.
If you stop now, you will have others to fight
more clever and more numerous than these.

1370

Orestes

Pylades, we have time no longer for lengthy speeches.
We must get inside as quick as ever we can,
only first worshiping the ancestral Gods
whose statues stand beside the forecourt here.

(Exit Orestes.)

Electra (praying to the statue of Apollo)

Apollo, Lord, give gracious ear to them
and to me, too, that often made you offerings,
out of such store as I had, with hand enriching.
Lycean One, Apollo, now I pray,
adore, entreat you on my knees, with all
the resources that I have, be kind to us,
help us in the fulfilment of our plans
and prove to all mankind the punishment
the Gods exact for wickedness.

1380

Chorus

See how the War God approaches,
breathing bloody vengeance, invincible.
They have gone under the roof-tree now,
the pursuers of villainy,
the hounds that none may escape.
So that the dream that hung hauntingly
in my mind shall not lack fulfilment.
Stealthy, stealthy, into the house,
he goes, the champion of dead men,
to his father's palace, rich from of old,
with his hands on the tool of blood, new-whetted.
Hermes, the child of Maia, conducts
the crafty deed to its end, and delays not.

1390

Electra

Dear ladies, now is the moment that the men
are finishing their work. Wait in silence.

Chorus

What do you mean? What are they doing?

Electra

She is preparing
the urn for burial, and they stand beside her.

1400

Chorus

Why have you hurried out here?

Electra

To watch

That Aegisthus does not come on them unawares.

Clytemnestra (cries from within the house)

House, O house

deserted by friends, full of killers!

Electra

Someone cries out, inside. Do you hear?

Chorus

What I hear is a terror to the ear.

I shudder at it.

Clytemnestra (cries again)

Oh! Oh!

Aegisthus, where are you?

Electra

Again, that cry!

Clytemnestra

My son, my son,

pity your mother!

1410

Electra

You had none for him,

nor for his father that begot him.

Chorus

City,

and miserable generation, now

the day-to-day pursuing fate is dying.

Clytemnestra

Oh! I am struck!

Electra

If you have strength—again!

Clytemnestra

Once more! Oh!

Electra

Would Aegisthus were with you!

Chorus

The courses are being fulfilled;
those under the earth are alive;
men long dead draw from their killers
blood to answer blood.

1420

And here they come. The red hand reeks
with War God's sacrifice. I cannot blame them.

Electra

Orestes, how have you fared?

Orestes

In the house, all
is well, if well Apollo prophesied.

Electra

Is the wretch dead?

Orestes

You need fear no more
that your proud mother will dishonor you.

Chorus

Stop! I can see Aegisthus clearly
coming this way.

Electra

Boys, back to the house!

1430

Orestes

He is in our power!

Electra

He walks from the suburb full of joy.

Chorus

Back to the vestibule, quick as you can.
You have done one part well. Here is the other.

Orestes

Do not be concerned, we will do it.

Electra

Go

where you will, then.

Orestes

See, I am gone (*hiding himself*).

Electra

Leave what is here to me.

Chorus

A few words spoken softly in his ear
would be good, that unawares
he may rush to his fight where Justice
will be his adversary.

1440

Aegisthus

Which of you knows where the Phocians are?
I am told they are come here with news for me
that Orestes met his end in a chariot wreck.
You there, yes, I mean you, you, you—
you have been bold enough before, and I should think
it is you these news concern most and therefore
you will know best to tell me.

Electra

I know. Of course. Were it not so, I would
be outcast from what concerns my best beloved.

Aegisthus

Where are the strangers then? Tell me that.

1450

Electra

Inside. They have found their hostess very kind.

Aegisthus

And do they genuinely report his death?

Electra

Better than that. They have brought himself, not news.

Aegisthus

Can I then see the body in plain sight?

Electra

You can indeed. It is an ugly sight.

Aegisthus

What you say delights me—an unusual thing!

Electra

You may delight, if you can find it here.

Aegisthus

Silence now! (*to the servants*) I command you, open the doors
for Mycenaeans, Argives all, to see
that if there be a man whom empty hope
has still puffed up, he may look on the dead
and so accept my biting, so may shun
a forcible encounter with myself
and punishment to make him grow some sense.

1460

Electra

I have done everything on my side. At long last
I have learned some sense, agreement with the stronger.

Aegisthus (looking at the shrouded corpse)

O Zeus, I see an image of what happened
not without envy of Gods. If that is something
I should not say, because of Nemesis,
I take it back. Draw all the covers from
his face that kinship at least may have due mourning.

Orestes

Touch it yourself. This body is not mine,
it is only yours—to see and greet with love.

1470

Aegisthus

True. I accept that. Will you call out
Clytemnestra if she is at home?

Orestes

She is near you.

You need not look elsewhere.

Aegisthus (as the face of Clytemnestra confronts him)

What do I see?

Orestes

Something you fear? Do you not know the face?

Aegisthus

Who are you that have driven us into the net
in which this victim fell?

Orestes

Did you take so long
to find that your names are all astray
and those you call the dead are living?

Aegisthus

Ah!

I understand. And you who speak to me
can only be Orestes.

1480

Orestes

Were you, so good a prophet, so long misled?

Aegisthus

This is my end then. Let me say one word.

Electra

Not one, not one word more,
I beg you, brother. Do not draw out the talking.
When men are in the middle of trouble, when one
is on the point of death, how can time matter?
Kill him as quickly as you can. And killing
throw him out to find such burial as suit him
out of our sights. This is the only thing
that can bring me redemption from
all my past sufferings.

1490

Orestes (to Aegisthus)

In with you, then. It is not words that now
are the issue, but your life.

Aegisthus

Why to the house?

Why do you need the dark if what you do
is fair? Why is your hand not ready to kill me?

Orestes

You are not to give orders. In where you killed him,
my father, so you may die in the same place!

Aegisthus

Must this house, by absolute necessity,
see the evils of the Pelopidae, now and to come?

Orestes

Yours it shall see, at least.
At least yours. There I am an excellent prophet.

Aegisthus

Your father did not have the skill you boast of.

1500

Orestes

Too many words! You are slow to take your road.
Go now.

Aegisthus

You lead the way.

Orestes

No, you go first.

Aegisthus

Afraid that I'll escape you?

Orestes

No, but you shall not
die as you choose. I must take care that death
is bitter for you. Justice shall be taken
directly on all who act above the law—
justice by killing. So we would have less villains.

Chorus

O race of Atreus, how many sufferings
were yours before you came at last so hardly
to freedom, perfected by this day's deed.

1510

PHILOCTETES

Translated and with an Introduction by

DAVID GRENE



INTRODUCTION TO PHILOCTETES

THE *Philoctetes* is the second-last play that Sophocles wrote. It probably came out in 409 B.C., and the last play, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, in 404, the year of Sophocles' death. Aristotle in the *Poetics* criticizes the *Philoctetes* for its happy ending, and many commentators since have been annoyed, or puzzled, or both by the solution of the play, which involves the God from the machine. Latterly, however, it has been more appreciated. There have been performances on the radio, and a surprising amount has been written about it, including a very interesting essay by Edmund Wilson in the *Wound and the Bow*. It is perhaps the most modern in feeling of all Sophocles' tragedies, and Sophocles is the most modern, the nearest to us, of the three Greek tragedians.

We may see the play simply as a duel between Philoctetes and Odysseus, with Neoptolemus as a pawn in the contest. But this play has a theme and a pattern which become deeper and more complicated, if we realize that in many of its aspects the story is the same as that of the *Oedipus at Colonus*. Each play, seen in the light of the other, makes more comprehensible Sophocles' tragic vision. Out of what personal suffering or vicarious experience he wrote this story twice in his last years, we shall never know. It is not only a preoccupation with the end of his life. With certain important differences the *Ajax*, written more than thirty years earlier than the *Philoctetes*, shows him thinking in the same way. Of course, each of these plays is individual in tone and character. What I mean is that, in both, the story is of a man offensive to his own society and banished by it, who, at last, must be reinstated and who becomes again miraculously potent, both alive and dead. And this story is the same in both plays in all its significant aspects.

Philoctetes is afflicted by some divine power without having committed a crime or being guilty of anything which the words "conscious guilt" mean, either to the fifth-century Greek or to ourselves.

He had unconsciously stumbled into a precinct or shrine of a God. Such shrines must not be thought of in the light of the Christian associations with the word. This was probably an unmarked and unfenced place, similar to the grove of the Eumenides in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. A snake—very often in Greece a symbol of a God's power—bit him in the foot and left him crippled. It is worth noting that Philoctetes' offense against the Gods is left at this. We are not allowed by the dramatist to speculate on any symbolic significance of his act of guilt or to construe it in any way as peculiar to Philoctetes. It is, in fact, an accident. He thus becomes burdened with the mark of God's resentment without any explanation for it humanly cogent either for himself or for others. The smell of his wound and his cries of agony render him so offensive to his comrades that he is marooned on a desert island for ten years, at the end of which time the Gods intervene to rescue him as mysteriously as they had injured him at the first. A glance at the *Oedipus* figure later and that of the *Ajax* in the earlier play shows a similar emphasis on the hero's innocence. It is true that *Ajax* is driven mad in the commission of an attempted murder against his generals, but Sophocles never tries to emphasize the matter of the murder afterward; it is only the performance of his act of frustration and misery by *Ajax* that we are likely to concern ourselves with.

Philoctetes is now an outcast from human sympathy but also the future conqueror of Troy. In both destruction and triumph, his lot does not make sense for ordinary men. This troubles them very little. They discarded him out of disgust at his affliction, when it looked as though God's hatred of him made that a safe course as well as a convenient one for themselves. Now that, with similar incomprehensibility, the divine purpose insists on the value of his bow and himself for the capture of Troy, they are prepared to restore him again to their society, particularly as the God has also arranged for his healing. In the *Philoctetes* Sophocles expresses what it feels like to be a man so isolated, so impersonally, so instrumentally used by his fellows.

The moment chosen is when the restoration to potency is near. Characteristically, *Odysseus*, who had marooned him originally and had taken advantage of Philoctetes when off his guard, plans to re-

capture him by similar strategic means. Neither time is he concerned to establish any human contact with the strange magical monster, so tormented and so honored by the non-human forces of the world. In this, Odysseus is blood-brother of Creon, who, in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, plays a similar role with the terrifying old beggar, Oedipus. In neither play does this cynical inhumanity have success. But neither are Philoctetes' brooding hatred and resentment allowed to have their way entirely. Here is where the role of Neoptolemus is important.

By trying to obey Odysseus, this boy comes to realize what cruelty is being inflicted on Philoctetes. So he undoes his offense and gives back the bow. However, when the deception is over and when the opportunity of healing and renown are offered Philoctetes again, by Neoptolemus this time, and as equal to equal, Philoctetes still refuses. The issue is clearly joined. Philoctetes' final refusal is the refusal of a man so wounded as to be unwilling to resume normal life itself because, with that life, will come new and unpredictable suffering. Better the old known pain, with the old known remedies, than the new hurt as unforeseeable as the future itself:

It is not the sting of wrongs past,
but what I must look for in wrongs to come.

This is all understandable, and, more than understandable, it claims our sympathy. But it is also irreconcilable with the vital principle which in anyone's life involves change and risk. It is easy for young Neoptolemus to face the future confidently. He has not yet been hurt enough to know what it feels like. Philoctetes' refusal is a great tragic human truth.

So Heracles is invoked not as an ordinary God from the machine but as the influence of a hero and old comrade, similarly injured, similarly restored, whose example must force Philoctetes to a step which will bring him healing and renown—but also more suffering. It is not that, as Aeschylus says, "out of suffering comes learning," but that only at the cost of suffering does life itself exist. As Philoctetes' final refusal is the mark of the play's truth to humanity, so is his final acquiescence in Heracles' order the mark of a truth to a univer-

sal principle, more imperative than humanity. But it is not the Philoctetes of the island, whom we have come to know so well, who goes to Troy with Odysseus and Neoptolemus. The significant part of that Philoctetes died, persisting to the end not to surrender his resentment and to risk new wrongs. This tragedy ends with his renewed refusal of Neoptolemus. What follows is what might well happen in the world as in the theater—the surrender of the individual life to the universal demands of life itself. As Hamlet must die and Fortinbras succeed, the new Philoctetes succeeds the old; but with the other Philoctetes of the island are buried all the years of wrong and of suffering and also the meaning that they had rendered to his agony.

CHARACTERS

Odysseus

Chorus of Sailors under the Command of Neoptolemus

The Spy Disguised as a Trader

Neoptolemus, Prince of Scyros and Son of Achilles

Philoctetes

Heracles

PHILOCTETES

SCENE: *A lonely spot on the island of Lemnos. Enter Odysseus and Neoptolemus.*

Odysseus

This is it; this Lemnos and its beach
down to the sea that quite surrounds it; desolate,
no one sets foot on it; there are no houses.
This is where I marooned him long ago,
the son of Poias, the Melian, his foot
diseased and eaten away with running ulcers.

Son of our greatest hero,
son of Achilles, Neoptolemus,
I tell you I had orders for what I did:
my masters, the princes, bade me do it.

We had no peace with him. at the holy festivals,
we dared not touch the wine and meat; he screamed
and groaned so, and those terrible cries of his
brought ill luck on our celebrations; all
the camp was haunted by him.

10

Now is no time to talk to you of this,
now is no time for long speeches.
I am afraid that he may hear of my coming
and ruin all my plans to take him.

It is you who must help me with the rest. Look about
and see where there might be a cave with two mouths.
There are two niches to rest in, one in the sun
when it is cold, the other a tunneled passage
through which the breezes blow in summertime.

A man can sleep there and be cool To the left,
a little, you may see a spring to drink at—
if it is still unchoked—go this way quietly,
see if he's there or somewhere else and signal.
Then I can tell you the rest Listen.
I shall tell you We will both do this thing.

20

Neoptolemus

What you speak of is near at hand, Odysseus.
I think I see such a cave.

Odysseus

Above or below? I cannot see it myself.

Neoptolemus

Above here, and no trace of a footpath.

Odysseus

See if he is housed within, asleep.

30

Neoptolemus

I see an empty hut, with no one there

Odysseus

And nothing to keep house with?

Neoptolemus

A pallet bed, stuffed with leaves, to sleep on, for someone.

Odysseus

And nothing else? Nothing inside the house?

Neoptolemus

A cup, made of a single block, a poor
workman's contrivance. And some kindling, too.

Odysseus

It is his treasure house that you describe.

Neoptolemus

And look, some rags are drying in the sun
full of the oozing matter from a sore.

Odysseus

Yes, certainly he lives here, even now
is somewhere not far off. He cannot go far,
sick as he is, lame cripple for so long.
It's likely he has gone to search for food
or somewhere that he knows there is a herb
to ease his pain. Send your man here to watch,
that he may not come upon me without warning.
For he would rather take me than all the Greeks.

40

Neoptolemus

Very well, then, the path will be watched.
Go on with your story, tell me what you want.

Odysseus

Son of Achilles,
our coming here has a purpose; to it be loyal
with more than with your body. If you should hear
some strange new thing, unlike what you have heard
before, still serve us, it was to serve you came here.

50

Neoptolemus

What would you have me do?

Odysseus

Ensnare

the soul of Philoctetes with your words.
When he asks who you are and whence you came,
say you are Achilles' son; you need not lie.
Say you are sailing home, leaving the Greeks
and all their fleet, in bitter hatred. Say
that they had prayed you, urged you from your home,
and swore that only with your help
could Troy be taken. Yet when you came and asked,
as by your right, to have your father's arms,
Achilles' arms, they did not think you worthy
but gave them to Odysseus. Say what you will
against me; do not spare me anything.

60

Nothing of this will hurt me; if you will not
do this, you will bring sorrow on all the Greeks.
If this man's bow shall not be taken by us,
you cannot sack the town of Troy.

Perhaps you wonder why you can safely meet him, 70
why he would trust you and not me. Let me explain
You have come here unforced, unpledged by oaths,
made no part of our earlier expedition
The opposite is true in my own case;
at no point can I deny his charge
If, when he sees me, Philoctetes
still has his bow, there is an end of me,
and you too, for my company would damn you.
For this you must sharpen your wits, to become a thief
of the arms no man has conquered.

I know, young man, it is not your natural bent
to say such things nor to contrive such mischief. 80
But the prize of victory is pleasant to win.
Bear up: another time we shall prove honest.
For one brief shameless portion of a day
give me yourself, and then for all the rest
you may be called most scrupulous of men

Neoptolemus

Son of Laertes, what I dislike to hear
I hate to put in execution.
I have a natural antipathy
to get my ends by tricks and stratagems
So, too, they say, my father was. Philoctetes
I will gladly fight and capture, bring him with us, 90
but not by treachery. Surely a one-legged man
cannot prevail against so many of us!
I recognize that I was sent with you
to follow your instructions. I am loath
to have you call me traitor. Still, my lord,

I would prefer even to fail with honor
than win by cheating.

Odysseus

You are a good man's son.
I was young, too, once, and then I had a tongue
very inactive and a doing hand.
Now as I go forth to the test, I see
that everywhere among the race of men
it is the tongue that wins and not the deed.

Neoptolemus

What do you bid me do, but to tell lies?

100

Odysseus

By craft I bid you take him, Philoctetes.

Neoptolemus

And why by craft rather than by persuasion?

Odysseus

He will not be persuaded; force will fail.

Neoptolemus

Has he such strength to give him confidence?

Odysseus

The arrows none may avoid, that carry death.

Neoptolemus

Then even to encounter him is not safe?

Odysseus

Not if you do not take him by craft, as I told you.

Neoptolemus

Do you not find it vile yourself, this lying?

Odysseus

Not if the lying brings our rescue with it.

Neoptolemus

How can a man not blush to say such things?

110

Odysseus

When one does something for gain, one need not blush

Neoptolemus

What gain for me that he should come to Troy?

Odysseus

His weapons alone are destined to take Troy.

Neoptolemus

Then I shall not be, as was said, its conqueror?

Odysseus

Not you apart from them nor they from you.

Neoptolemus

They must be my quarry then, if this is so.

Odysseus

You will win a double prize if you do this.

Neoptolemus

What? If I know, I will do what you say.

Odysseus

You shall be called a wise man and a good.

Neoptolemus

Well, then I will do it, casting aside all shame.

120

Odysseus

You clearly recollect all I have told you?

Neoptolemus

Yes, now that I have understood it.

Odysseus

Stay

and wait his coming here; I will go

that he may not spy my presence.

I will take with me to the ship this guard.

If you are too slow, I will send him back again,

disguise him as a sailor; Philoctetes

will never know him.

Whatever clever story he give you, then

130

fall in with it and use it as you need.
 Now I will go to the ship and leave you in charge.
 May Hermes, God of Craft, the Guide, for us
 be guide indeed, and Victory and Athene,
 the City Goddess, who preserves me ever

(Exit Odysseus)

Chorus

Sir, we are strangers, and this land is strange;
 what shall we say and what conceal from this suspicious man?
 Tell us
 For cunning that passes another's cunning
 and a pre-eminent judgment lie with the prince,
 in whose sovereign keeping is Zeus's holy scepter.
 To you, young lord, all this has come,
 all the power of your forefathers. Tell us now
 what we must do to serve you

140

Neoptolemus

Now—if you wish to see where he sleeps
 on his crag at the edge—look, be not afraid.
 But when the terrible wanderer returns,
 be gone from the hut, but come to my beckoning.
 Take your cues from me. Help when you can.

Chorus

Sir, this we have always done,
 have kept a watchful eye over your safety.
 But now
 tell us what places he inhabits
 and where he rests. It would not be amiss
 for us to know this,
 lest he attack us unawares.
 Where does he live? Where does he rest?
 What footpath does he follow? Is he in the house or not?

150

Neoptolemus

This, that you see, is his two-fronted house,
 and he sleeps inside on the rock.

160

Chorus

Where is he gone, unhappy creature?

Neoptolemus

I am sure
he has gone to find food somewhere near here;
stumbling, lame, dragging along the path,
he is trying to shoot birds to prolong his miserable life.
This indeed, they say, is how he lives.
And no one comes near to cure him.

Chorus

Yes, for my part I pity him:
how unhappy, how utterly alone, always
he suffers the savagery of his illness
with no one to care for him,
with no friendly face near him,
but bewildered and distraught at each need as it comes
God pity him, how has he kept a grip on life?

170

Woe to the contrivances of death-bound men,
woe to the unhappy generations of death-bound men
whose lives have known extremes!

Perhaps this man is as well born as any,
second to no son of an ancient house.
Yet now his life lacks everything,
and he makes his bed without neighbors
or with spotted shaggy beasts for neighbors.
His thoughts are set continually on pain and hunger.
He cries out in his wretchedness;
there is only a blabbering echo,
that comes from the distance speeding
from his bitter crying.

180

190

Neoptolemus

I am not surprised at any of this:
this is a God's doing, if I have any understanding.

These afflictions that have come upon him
are the work of Chryse, bitter of heart.
As for his present loneliness and suffering,
this, too, no doubt is part of the God's plan
that he may not bend against Troy
the divine invincible bow
until the time shall be fulfilled, at which it is decreed,
that Troy, as they say, shall fall to that bow

200

Chorus

Hush.

Neoptolemus

What is it?

Chorus

Hush! I hear a footfall,
footfall of a man that walks painfully.
Is it here? Is it here?
I hear a voice, now I can hear it clearly,
voice of a man, crawling along the path,
hard put to it to move. It's far away,
but I can hear it, I can hear the sound well
the voice of a man wounded; it is quite clear now.

No more now, my son.

210

Neoptolemus

No more of what?

Chorus

Your plots and plans. He is here, almost with us.
His is no cheerful marching to the pipe
like a shepherd with his flock.
No, a bitter cry.
He must have stumbled far down on the path,
and his moaning carried all the way here.
Or perhaps he stopped to look at the empty harbor,
for it was a bitter cry.

Philoctetes

Men, who are you that have put in, rowing
to a shore without houses or anchorage?
What countrymen may I call you without offense?
What is your people? Greeks, indeed, you seem
in fashion of your clothing, dear to me.
May I hear your voice? Do not be afraid
or shrink from such as I am, grown a savage.
I have been alone and very wretched,
without friend or comrade, suffering a great deal.
Take pity on me; speak to me; speak,
speak if you come as friends.

220

No—answer me.

230

If this is all
that we can have from one another, speech,
this, at least, we should have.

Neoptolemus

Sir, for your questions, since you wish to know,
know we are Greeks.

Philoctetes

Friendliest of tongues!

That I should hear it spoken once again
by such a man in such a place! My boy,
who are you? Who has sent you here? What brought you?
What impulse? What friendliest of winds?
Tell me all this, that I know who you are.

Neoptolemus

I am of Scyrus that the sea surrounds;
I am sailing home. My name is Neoptolemus,
Achilles' son. Now you know everything.

240

Philoctetes

Son of a father—that I loved so dearly—
and of a country that I loved, you that were reared
by that old man Lycomedes, what kind of venture
can have brought you to port here? Where did you sail from?

Neoptolemus

At present bound from Troy

Philoctetes

From Troy? From Troy!

You did not sail with us to Troy at first.

Neoptolemus

You, then, are one that also had a share
in all that trouble?

Philoctetes

Is it possible
you do not know me, boy, me whom you see here?

Neoptolemus

I never saw you before How could I know you?

250

Philoctetes

You never heard my name then? Never a rumor
of all the wrongs I suffered, even to death?

Neoptolemus

I never knew a word of what you ask me.

Philoctetes

Surely I must be vile! God must have hated me
that never a word of me, of how I live here,
should have come home through all the land of Greece.
Yet they that outraged God casting me away
can hold their tongues and laugh! While my disease
always increases and grows worse. My boy,
you are Achilles' son. I that stand here
am one you may have heard of, as the master
of Heracles' arms. I am Philoctetes
the son of Poias. Those two generals
and Prince Odysseus of the Cephallenians
cast me ashore here to their shame, as lonely
as you can see me now, wasting with my sickness
as cruel as it is, caused by the murderous bite
of a viper mortally dangerous.

260

I was already bitten when we put in here
on my way from sea-encircled Chryse.
I tell you, boy, those men cast me away here
and ran and left me helpless They were happy
when they saw that I had fallen asleep on the shore
in a rocky cave, after a rough passage.

270

They went away and left me with such rags—
and few enough of them—as one might give
an unfortunate beggar and a handful of food.
May God give them the like!

Think, boy, of that awakening when I awoke
and found them gone; think of the useless tears
and curses on myself when I saw the ships—
my ships, which I had once commanded—gone,
all gone, and not a man left on the island,
not one to help me or to lend a hand
when I was seized with my sickness, not a man!
In all I saw before me nothing but pain;
but of that a great abundance, boy.

280

Time came and went for me. In my tiny shelter
I must alone do everything for myself.
This bow of mine I used to shoot the birds
that filled my belly. I must drag my foot,
my cursed foot, to where the bolt
sped by the bow's thong had struck down a bird.
If I must drink, and it was winter time—
the water was frozen—I must break up firewood.
Again I crawled and miserably contrived
to do the work. Whenever I had no fire,
rubbing stone on stone I would at last produce
the spark that kept me still in life.
A roof for shelter, if only I have fire,
gives me everything but release from pain.

290

Boy, let me tell you of this island.
No sailor by his choice comes near it.

300

There is no anchorage, nor anywhere
that one can land, sell goods, be entertained.
Sensible men make no voyages here.
Yet now and then someone puts in. A stretch
of time as long as this allows much to happen.
When they have come here, boy, they pity me—
at least they say they do—and in their pity
they have given me scraps of food and cast-off clothes,
that other thing, when I dare mention it,
none of them will—bringing me home again.

310

It is nine years now that I have spent dying,
with hunger and pain feeding my insatiable
disease. That, boy, is what they have done to me,
the two Atridae, and that mighty Prince
Odysseus. May the Gods that live in heaven
grant that they pay, agony for my agony.

Chorus

In this, I too resemble your other visitors.
I pity you, son of Poias.

Neoptolemus

I am a witness,
I also, of the truth of what you say.
I know it is true. I have dealt with those villains,
the two Atridae and the prince Odysseus.

320

Philoctetes

Are you, as well as I, a sufferer
and angry? Have you grounds against the Atridae?

Neoptolemus

Give me the chance to gratify my anger
with my hand some day!
Then will Mycenae know and Sparta know
that Scyrus, too, breeds soldiers.

Philoctetes

Well said, boy!
You come to me with a great hate against them.
Because of what?

Neoptolemus

I will tell you, Philoctetes—
for all that it hurts to tell it—
of how I came to Troy and what dishonor
they put upon me.
When fatefully Achilles came to die. . . .

330

Philoctetes

O stop! tell me no more. Let me understand
this first. Is he dead, Achilles, dead?

Neoptolemus

Yes, he is dead; no man his conqueror
but bested by a god, Phoebus the archer.

Philoctetes

Noble was he that killed and he that died.
Boy, I am at a loss which to do first,
ask for your story or to mourn for him.

Neoptolemus

God help you, I would think that your own sufferings
were quite enough without mourning for those of others.

340

Philoctetes

Yes, that is true. Again, tell me your story
of how they have insulted you.

Neoptolemus

They came
for me, did great Odysseus and the man
that was my father's tutor, with a ship
wonderfully decked with ribbons. They had a story—
be it truth or lie—that it was God's decree
since he, my father, was dead, I and I only
should take Troy town.

This was their story Sir, you can imagine
it did not take much time, when they had told it, 350
for me to embark with them
Chiefly, you know, I was prompted by love of him,
the dead man I had hope of seeing him
while still unburied Alive I never had
We had a favoring wind; on the second day
we touched Sigeion. As I disembarked,
all of the soldiers swarmed around me, blessed me,
swore that they saw Achilles alive again,
now gone from them forever But he still lay
unburied I, his mourning son, wept for him, 360
then, in a while, came to the two Atreidae,
my friends, as it seemed right to do, and asked them
for my father's arms and all that he had else.
They needed brazen faces for their answer
"Son of Achilles, all that your father had,
all else, is yours to take, but not his arms
Another man now owns them, Laertes' son "
I burst into tears, jumped up, enraged,
cried out in my pain, "You scoundrels, did you dare
to give those arms that were mine to someone else 370
before I knew of it?" Then Odysseus
spoke—he was standing near me—"Yes, and rightly,"
he said, "they gave them, boy For it was I
who rescued them and him, their former owner "
My anger got the better of me; I cursed him outright
with every insult that I knew, sparing none,
if he should take my arms away from me
He is no way given to quarreling, but at this
he was stung by what I said He answered
"You were not where we were You were at home,
out of the reach of duty. Since, besides,
you have so bold a tongue in your head, never 380
will you possess them to bring home to Scyrus."

There it was, abuse on both sides. But I lost
 what should be mine and so sailed home. Odysseus,
 that filthy son of filthy parents, robbed me.
 Yet I do not blame him even so much as the princes.
 All of a city is in the hand of the prince,
 all of an army; unruly men become so
 by the instruction of their betters.
 This is the whole tale. May he that hates the Atridae
 be as dear in the Gods' sight as he is in mine.

390

Chorus

Earth, Mountain Mother, in whom we find sustenance,
 Mother of Zeus himself,
 Dweller in great golden Pactolus,
 Mother that I dread
 on that other day, too, I called on thee, Thou Blessed One,
 Thou that rides on the Bull-killing Lions,
 when all the insolence of the Atridae assaulted our Prince,
 when they gave his arms, that wonder of the world,
 to the son of Laertes.

400

Philoctetes

You have sailed here, as it seems, with a clear tally;
 your half of sorrow matches that of mine.
 What you tell me rings in harmony. I recognize
 the doings of the Atridae and Odysseus.
 I know Odysseus would employ his tongue
 on every ill tale, every rascality,
 that could be brought to issue in injustice.
 This is not at all my wonder, but that Ajax
 the Elder should stand by, see and allow it.

410

Neoptolemus

He is no longer living, sir; never, indeed,
 if he were, would they have robbed me of the arms.

Philoctetes

What! Is he, too, dead and gone?

Neoptolemus

Yes, dead and gone. As such now think of him

Philoctetes

But not the son of Tydeus nor Odysseus
whom Sisyphus once sold to Laertes,
they will not die; for they should not be living.

Neoptolemus

Of course, they are not dead; you may be sure
that they are in their glory among the Greeks.

420

Philoctetes

What of an old and honest man, my friend,
Nestor of Pylos? Is he alive? He used
to check their mischief by his wise advice

Neoptolemus

Things have gone badly for him. He has lost
his son Antilochus, who once stood by him.

Philoctetes

Ah!

You have told me the two deaths that most could hurt me
Alas, what should I look for
when Ajax and Antilochus are dead,
and still Odysseus lives, that in their stead
ought to be counted among the dead?

430

Neoptolemus

A cunning wrestler; still, Philoctetes,
even the cunning are sometimes tripped up

Philoctetes

Tell me, by the Gods, where was Patroclus,
who was your father's dearest friend?

Neoptolemus

Dead, too.

In one short sentence I can tell you this.
War never takes a bad man but by chance,
the good man always.

Philoctetes

You have said the truth.

So I will ask you of one quite unworthy
but dexterous and clever with his tongue.

440

Neoptolemus

Whom can you mean except Odysseus?

Philoctetes

It is not he: there was a man, Thersites,
who never was content to speak once only,
though no one was for letting him speak at all.
Do you know if he is still alive?

Neoptolemus

I did not know him,
but I have heard that he is still alive.

Philoctetes

He would be; nothing evil has yet perished.
The Gods somehow give them most excellent care.
They find their pleasure in turning back from Death
the rogues and tricksters, but the just and good
they are always sending out of the world.
How can I reckon the score, how can I praise,
when praising Heaven I find the Gods are bad?

450

Neoptolemus

For my own part, Philoctetes of Oeta,
from now on I shall take precautions.
I shall look at Troy and the Atridae both
from very far off. I shall never abide
the company of those where the worse man
has more power than the better, where the good
are always on the wane and cowards rule.
For the future, rocky Scyrus will content me
to take my pleasure at home.
Now I will be going to my ship. Philoctetes,
on you God's blessing and goodbye. May the Gods

460

recover you of your sickness, as you would have it!
Let us go, men, that when God grants us sailing
we may be ready to sail.

Philoctetes

Boy, are you going,
going now?

Neoptolemus

Yes, the weather favors.
We must look to sail almost at once.

Philoctetes

My dear—I beg you in your father's name,
and in your mother's, in the name of all
that you have loved at home, do not leave me here
alone, living in sufferings you have seen
and others I have told you of.

470

I am not your main concern; give me a passing thought.
I know that there is horrible discomfort
in having me on board. Put up with it.
To such as you and your nobility,
meanness is shameful, decency honorable.
If you leave me here, it is an ugly story.
If you take me, men will say their best of you,
if I shall live to see Oetean land.

Come! One day, hardly one whole day's space
that I shall trouble you. Endure this much.

480

Take me and put me where you will,
in the hold, in the prow or poop, anywhere
where I shall least offend those that I sail with.
By Zeus himself, God of the Suppliants,
I beg you, boy, say "Yes," say you will do it.
Here I am on my knees to you, poor cripple,
for all my lameness. Do not cast me away
so utterly alone, where no one even walks by.
Either take me and set me safe in your own home,
or take me to Chalcedon in Euboea.

From there it will be no great journey for me 490
 to Oeta or to ridgy Trachis or
 to quick-flowing Spercheius,
 and so you show me to my loving father.
 For many a day I have feared that he is dead.
 With those who came to my island I sent messages,
 and many of them, begging him to come
 and bring me home himself Either he's dead,
 or, as I rather think, my messengers
 made little of what I asked them and hurried home.
 Now in you I have found both escort and messenger; 500
 bring me safe home. Take pity on me.
 Look how men live, always precariously
 balanced between good and bad fortune.
 If you are out of trouble, watch for danger
 And when you live well, then consider the most
 your life, lest ruin take it unawares.

Chorus

Have pity on him, prince.
 He has told us of a most desperate course run.
 God forbid such things should overtake friends of mine.
 And, prince, if you hate the abominable Atridae 510
 I would set their ill treatment of him
 to his gain and would carry him
 in your quick, well-fitted ship
 to his home and so avoid offense before the face of God.

Neoptolemus

Take care that your assent is not too ready,
 and that, when you have enough of his diseased company, 520
 you are no longer constant to what you have said.

Chorus

No. You will never be able in this
 to reproach me with justice.

Neoptolemus

I should be ashamed
to be less ready than you to render a stranger service
Well, if you will then, let us sail Let him
get ready quickly. My ship will carry him

May God give us a safe clearance from this land
and a safe journey where we choose to go

Philoctetes

God bless this day!

530

Man, dear to my very heart,
and you, dear friends, how shall I prove to you
how you have bound me to your friendship!
Let us go, boy. But let us first kiss the earth,
reverently, in my homeless home of a cave.
I would have you know what I have lived from,
how tough the spirit that did not break I think
the sight itself would have been enough for anyone
except myself Necessity has taught me,
little by little, to suffer and be patient.

Chorus

Wait! Let us see. Two men are coming
One of them is of our crew, the other a foreigner.
Let us hear from them and then go in

540

(Enter the Sailor disguised as a Trader.)

Trader

Son of Achilles, I told my fellow traveler here—
he with two others were guarding your ship—
to tell me where you were. I happened on you.
I had no intentions this way. Just by accident
I came to anchor at this island.
I am sailing in command of a ship outward bound
from Ilium, with no great company, for Peparethus—
a good country, that, for wine. When I heard
that all those sailors were the crew of your ship,

550

I thought I should not hold my tongue and sail on
until I spoke with you—and got my reward,
a fair one, doubtless. Apparently you do not know
much of your own affairs, nor what new plans
the Greeks have for you. Indeed, not only plans,
actions in train already and not slowly.

Neoptolemus

Thank you for your consideration, sir.
I will remain obliged to your kindness
unless I prove unworthy. Please tell me
what you have spoken of. I would like to know
what are these new plans of the Greeks.

560

Trader

Old Phoenix and the two sons of Theseus are gone,
pursuing you with a squadron.

Neoptolemus

Do they intend
to bring me back with violence or persuade me?

Trader

I do not know. I tell you what I heard.

Neoptolemus

Are Phoenix and his friends in such a hurry
to do the bidding of the two Atridae?

Trader

It is being done.
There is no delay about it. That you should know.

Neoptolemus

How is it that Odysseus was not ready
to sail as his own messenger on such
an errand? It cannot be he was afraid?

Trader

When I weighed anchor, he and Tydeus' son
were in pursuit of still another man.

570

Neoptolemus

Who was this other man that Odysseus himself should seek him?

Trader

There was a man—perhaps you will tell me first
who this is; and say softly what you say.

Neoptolemus

This, sir, is the famous Philoctetes.

Trader

Do not
ask me any further questions. Get yourself out,
as quickly as you can, out of this island.

Philoctetes

What does he say, boy? Why in dark whispers
does he bargain with you about me, this sailor?

Neoptolemus

I do not know yet what he says, but he must say it,
openly, whatever it is, to you and me and these

580

Trader

Son of Achilles, do not slander me,
speaking of me to the army as a tattler.
There's many a thing I do for them and in return
get something from them, as a poor man may.

Neoptolemus

I am the enemy of the Atridae. This
is my greatest friend because he hates the Atridae.
You have come to me as a friend, and so you must
hide from me nothing that you heard.

Trader

Well, watch what you are doing, sir.

Neoptolemus

I have.

Trader

I put the whole responsibility
squarely upon yourself.

Neoptolemus

Do so; but speak.

590

Trader

Well, then. The two I have spoken of,
the son of Tydeus and the Prince Odysseus,
are in pursuit of Philoctetes.
They have sworn, so help them God, to bring him with them
either by persuasion or by brute force.
And this all the Greeks heard clearly announced
by Prince Odysseus; for he was much surer
of success than was the other.

Neoptolemus

What can have made
the Atridae care about him after so long—
one whom they, years and years since, cast away?
What yearning for him came over them? Was it the Gods
who punish evil doings that now have driven them
to retribution for injustice?

600

Trader

I will explain all that. Perhaps you haven't heard.
There was a prophet of very good family,
a son of Priam indeed, called Helenus.
He was captured one night in an expedition
undertaken singlehanded by Odysseus,
of whom all base and shameful things are spoken,
captured by stratagem. Odysseus brought
his prisoner before the Greeks, a splendid prize.
Helenus prophesied everything to them
and, in particular, touching the fortress of Troy,
that they could never take it till they persuaded
Philoctetes to come with them and leave his island.
As soon as Odysseus heard the prophet say this,
he promised at once to bring the man before them,
for all to see—he thought, as a willing prisoner,
but, if not that, against his will. If he failed,

610

"any of them might have his head," he declared. My boy,
that is the whole story; that is why I urge you
and him and any that you care for to make haste.

620

Philoctetes

Ah!

Did he indeed swear that he would persuade me
to sail with him, did he so, that utter devil?
As soon shall I be persuaded, when I am dead,
to rise from Death's house, come to the light again,
as his own father did.

Trader

I do not know about that. Well, I will be going now
to my ship. May God prosper you both!

(*Exit Trader.*)

Philoctetes

Is it not terrible, boy, that this Odysseus
should think that there are words soft enough to win me,
to let him put me in his boat, exhibit me
in front of all the Greeks?

630

No! I would rather listen to my worst enemy,
the snake that bit me, made me into this cripple.
But he can say anything, he can dare anything.
Now I know that he will come here.

Boy, let us go, that a great sea may sever
us from Odysseus' ship.

Let us go. For look, haste in due season shown
brings rest and peace when once the work is done.

Neoptolemus

When the wind at our prow falls, we can sail, no sooner.
Now it is dead against us.

640

Philoctetes

It is always fair sailing, when you escape evil.

Neoptolemus

Yes, but the wind is against them, too.

Philoctetes

For pirates
when they can thieve and plunder, no wind is contrary.

Neoptolemus

If you will, then, let us go. Take from your cave
what you need most and love most.

Philoctetes

There are some things I need, but no great choice.

Neoptolemus

What is there that you will not find on board?

Philoctetes

A herb I have, the chief means to soothe my wound,
to lull the pain to sleep.

650

Neoptolemus

Bring it out then.
What else is there that you would have?

Philoctetes

Any arrow
I may have dropped and missed. For none of them
must I leave for another to pick up.

Neoptolemus

Is this, in your hands, the famous bow?

Philoctetes

Yes, this,
this in my hands.

Neoptolemus

May I see it closer,
touch and adore it like a god?

Philoctetes

You may have it
and anything else of mine that is for your good.

Neoptolemus

I long for it, yet only with such longing

660

that if it is lawful, I may have it, else
let it be.

Philoctetes

Your words are holy, boy It is lawful
for you have given me, and you alone,
the sight of the sun shining above us here,
the sight of my Oeta, of my old father, my friends
You have raised me up above my enemies,
when I was under their feet. You may be confident.
You may indeed touch my bow, give it again
to me that gave it you, proclaim that alone
of all the world you touched it, in return
for the good deed you did. It was for that,
for friendly help, I myself won it first.

670

Neoptolemus

I am glad to see you and take you as a friend.
For one who knows how to show and to accept kindness
will be a friend better than any possession
Go in.

Philoctetes

I will bring you with me. The sickness in me
seeks to have you beside me.

Chorus

In story I have heard, but my eyes have not seen
him that once would have drawn near to Zeus's bed.
I have heard how he caught him, bound him on a running wheel,
Zeus, son of Kronos, invincible.
But I know of no other,
by hearsay, much less by sight, of all mankind
whose destiny was more his enemy when he met it
than Philoctetes', who wronged no one, nor killed
but lived, just among the just,
and fell in trouble past his deserts.
There is wonder, indeed, in my heart
how, how in his loneliness,

680

listening to the waves beating on the shore,
how he kept hold at all
on a life so full of tears.

690

He was lame, and no one came near him
He suffered, and there were no neighbors for his sorrow
with whom his cries would find answer,
with whom he could lament the bloody plague
that ate him up.

No one who would gather
fallen leaves from the ground
to quiet the raging, bleeding sore,
running, in his maggot-rotten foot.

700

Here and there he crawled
writhing always—
suffering like a child
without the nurse he loves—
to what source of ease he could find
when the heart-devouring suffering gave over.

No grain sown in holy earth was his, nor other food
of all enjoyed by us, men who live by labor,
save when with the feathered arrows shot by the quick bow
he got him fodder for his belly.

710

Alas, poor soul,
that never in ten years' length
enjoyed a drink of wine
but looked always for the standing pools
and approached them.

But now he will end fortunate. He has fallen in
with the son of good men. He will be great, after it all.
Our prince in his seaworthy craft will carry him
after the fulness of many months, to his father's home
in the country of the Malian nymphs,
by the banks of the Spercheius,

720

where the hero of the bronze shield ascended
to all the Gods, ablaze in holy fire
above the ridges of Oeta.

Neoptolemus

Come if you will, then. Why have you nothing to say?
Why do you stand, in silence transfixed?

730

Philoctetes

Oh! Oh!

Neoptolemus

What is it?

Philoctetes

Nothing to be afraid of. Come on, boy.

Neoptolemus

Is it the pain of your inveterate sickness?

Philoctetes

No, no, indeed not. Just now I think I feel better.
O Gods!

Neoptolemus

Why do you call on the Gods with cries of distress?

Philoctetes

That they may come as healers, come with gentleness.
Oh! Oh!

Neoptolemus

What ails you? Tell me; do not keep silence.
You are clearly in some pain.

740

Philoctetes

I am lost, boy.
I will not be able to hide it from you longer.
Oh! Oh!
It goes through me, right through me!
Miserable, miserable!
I am lost, boy. I am being eaten up. Oh!

By God, if you have a sword, ready to hand, use it!
Strike the end of my foot Strike it off, I tell you, now.
Do not spare my life. Quick, boy, quick.

750

(*A long silence.*)

Neoptolemus

What is this thing that comes upon you suddenly,
that makes you cry and moan so?

Philoctetes

Do you know, boy?

Neoptolemus

What is it?

Philoctetes

Do you know, boy?

Neoptolemus

What do you mean?

I do not know.

Philoctetes

Surely you know. Oh! Oh!

Neoptolemus

The terrible burden of your sickness.

Philoctetes

Terrible it is, beyond words' reach. But pity me.

Neoptolemus

What shall I do?

Philoctetes

Do not be afraid and leave me.

She comes from time to time, perhaps when she has had
her fill of wandering in other places.

Neoptolemus

You most unhappy man,
you that have endured all agonies, lived through them,
shall I take hold of you? Shall I touch you?

760

Philoctetes

Not that, above everything. But take this bow,
as you asked to do just now, until the pain,
the pain of my sickness, that is now upon me, grows less.
Keep the bow, guard it safely. Sleep comes upon me
when the attack is waning. The pain will not end till then.
But you must let me sleep quietly.
If they should come in the time when I sleep,
by the Gods I beg you do not give up my bow
willingly or unwillingly to anyone.
And let no one trick you out of it, lest you prove
a murderer—your own and mine that kneeled to you.

770

Neoptolemus

I shall take care; be easy about that. It shall not pass
except to your hands and to mine. Give it to me now,
and may good luck go with it!

Philoctetes

Here,
take it, boy. Bow in prayer to the Gods' envy
that the bow may not be to you a sorrow
nor as it was to me and its former master.

Neoptolemus

You Gods, grant us both this and grant us
a journey speedy with a prosperous wind
to where God sends us and our voyage holds.

780

Philoctetes

An empty prayer, I am afraid, boy:
the blood is trickling, dripping murderously
from its deep spring. I look for something new.
It is coming now, coming. Ah!
You have the bow. Do not go away from me.

Ah!

O man of Cephallenia, would it were you,
Would it were your breast that the pains transfix.

Ah!

790

Agamemnon and Menelaus, my two generals,
would it were your two bodies that had fed
this sickness for as long as mine has. Ah!

Death, death, how is it that I can call on you,
always, day in, day out, and you cannot come to me?
Boy, my good boy, take up this body of mine
and burn it on what they call the Lemnian fire.
I had the resolution once to do this for another,
the son of Zeus, and so obtained the arms
that you now hold. What do you say?
What do you say? Nothing? Where are you, boy?

800

Neoptolemus

I have been in pain for you; I have been
in sorrow for your pain.

Philoctetes

No, boy, keep up your heart. She is quick in coming
and quick to go. Only I entreat you, do not
leave me alone.

Neoptolemus

Do not be afraid. We shall stay.

810

Philoctetes

You will?

Neoptolemus

You may be sure of it.

Philoctetes

Your oath,
I do not think it fit to put you to your oath.

Neoptolemus

I may not go without you, Philoctetes.

Philoctetes

Give me your hand upon it.

Neoptolemus

Here I give it you,
to remain.

Philoctetes

Now—take me away from here—

Neoptolemus

What do you mean?

Philoctetes

Up, up.

Neoptolemus

What madness is upon you? Why do you look
on the sky above us?

Philoctetes

Let me go, let me go.

Neoptolemus

Where?

Philoctetes

Oh, let me go.

Neoptolemus

Not I.

Philoctetes

You will kill me if you touch me.

Neoptolemus

Now I shall let you go, now you are calmer.

Philoctetes

Earth, take my body, dying as I am.

The pain no longer lets me stand.

820

Neoptolemus

In a little while, I think,
sleep will come on this man. His head is nodding.
The sweat is soaking all his body over,
and a black flux of blood and matter has broken
out of his foot. Let us leave him quiet, friends,
until he falls asleep.

Chorus

Sleep that knows not pain nor suffering
kindly upon us, Lord,
kindly, kindly come
Spread your enveloping radiance,
as now, over his eyes
Come, come, Lord Healer.

830

Boy, look to your standing,
look to your going, look to your plans
for the future. Do you see? He sleeps.
What is it we are waiting to do?
Ripeness that holds decision over all things
wins many a victory suddenly.

Neoptolemus

Yes, it is true he hears nothing, but I see we have hunted in vain,
vainly have captured our quarry the bow, if we sail without him.
His is the crown of victory, him the God said we must bring.
Shame shall be ours if we boast and our lies still leave victory
unwon.

840

Chorus

Boy, to all of this the God shall look.
Answer me gently;
low, low, whisper,
whisper, boy.
The sleep of a sick man has keen eyes.
It is a sleep unsleeping.

But to the limits of what you can,
look to this, look to this secretly,
how you may do it.
You know of whom I speak.
If your mind holds the same purpose touching this man,
the wise can see trouble and no way to cure it.
It is a fair wind, boy, a fair wind:
the man is eyeless and helpless,

850

outstretched under night's blanket—
 asleep in the sun is good—
 neither of foot nor of hand nor of anything is he master,
 but is even as one that lies in Death's house.
 Look to it, look if what you say
 is seasonable. As far as my mind,
 boy, can grasp it, best is the trouble taken
 that causes the least fear.

860

Neoptolemus

Quiet, I tell you! Are you mad? He is stirring,
 his eyes are stirring; he is raising his head.

Philoctetes

Blessed the light that comes after my sleep,
 blessed the watching of friends.
 I never would have hoped this,
 that you would have the pity of heart to support
 my afflictions, that you should stand by me and help.
 The Atridae, those brave generals, were not so,
 they could not so easily put up with me.
 You have a noble nature, Neoptolemus,
 and noble were your parents. You have made light
 of all of this—the offense of my cries and the smell.
 And now, since it would seem I can forget
 my sickness for a while and rest, raise me yourself,
 raise me up, boy, and set me on my feet,
 that when my weariness releases me,
 we can go to the ship and sail without delay.

870

880

Neoptolemus

I am glad to see you unexpectedly,
 eyes open, free of pain, still with the breath of life.
 With suffering like yours, all the signs pointed
 to your being dead. Now, lift yourself up.
 If you would rather, these men will lift you. They
 will spare no trouble, since you and I are agreed.

Philoctetes

Thanks, boy. Lift me yourself, as you thought of it.
Do not trouble them, let them not be disquieted
before they need by the foul smell of me; living
on board with me will try their patience enough

890

Neoptolemus

Very well, then; stand on your feet; take hold yourself

Philoctetes

Do not be afraid; old habit will help me up.

Neoptolemus

Now is the moment What shall I do from now on?

Philoctetes

What is it, boy? Where are your words straying?

Neoptolemus

I do not know what to say I am at a loss

Philoctetes

Why are you at a loss? Do not say so, boy.

Neoptolemus

It is indeed my case.

Philoctetes

Is it disgust at my sickness? Is it this
that makes you shrink from taking me?

900

Neoptolemus

All is disgust when one leaves his own nature
and does things that misfit it.

Philoctetes

It is not unlike your father, either in word
or in act, to help a good man.

Neoptolemus

I shall be shown to be dishonorable:
I am afraid of that.

Philoctetes

Not in your present actions. Your words make me hesitate.

Neoptolemus

Zeus, what must I do? Twice be proved base,
hiding what I should not, saying what is most foul?

Philoctetes

Unless I am wrong, here is a man who will
betray me, leave me—so it seems—and sail away.

910

Neoptolemus

Not I; I will not leave you. To your bitterness,
I shall send you on a journey—and I dread this.

Philoctetes

What are you saying, boy? I do not understand.

Neoptolemus

I will not hide anything. You must sail to Troy
to the Achaeans, join the army of the Atreidae.

Philoctetes

What! What can you mean?

Neoptolemus

Do not cry yet
until you learn.

Philoctetes

Learn what? What would you do with me?

Neoptolemus

First save you from this torture, then with you
go and lay waste the land of Troy.

920

Philoctetes

You would?
This is, in truth, what you intend?

Neoptolemus

Necessity,
a great necessity compels it. Do not be angry.

Philoctetes

Then I am lost. I am betrayed. Why, stranger,
have you done this to me? Give me back my bow

Neoptolemus

That I cannot. Justice and interest
make me obedient to those in authority

Philoctetes

You fire, you every horror, most hateful engine
of ruthless mischief, what have you done to me,
what treachery! Have you no shame to see me
that kneeled to you, entreated you, hard of heart?

930

You robbed me of my livelihood, taking my bow.
Give it back, I beg you, give it back, I pray, my boy!
By your father's Gods, do not take my livelihood
He does not say a word,
but turns away his eyes He will not give it up

Caverns and headlands, dens of wild creatures,
you jutting broken crags, to you I raise my cry—
there is no one else that I can speak to—
and you have always been there, have always heard me,
Let me tell you what he has done to me, this boy,
Achilles' son. He swore to bring me home;
he brings me to Troy He gave me his right hand,
then took and keeps my sacred bow,
the bow of Heracles, the son of Zeus,
and means to show it to the Argives,
as though in me he had conquered a strong man,
as though he led me captive to his power.
He does not know he is killing one that is dead,
a kind of vaporous shadow, a mere wraith.
Had I had my strength, he had not conquered me,
for, even as I am, it was craft that did it
I have been deceived and am lost.
What can I do?

940

Give it back. Be your true self again. Will you not?
No word. Then I am nothing.

950

Two doors cut in the rock, to you again,
again I come, enter again, unarmed,
no means to feed myself! Here in this passage
I shall shrivel to death alone. I shall kill no more,
neither winged bird nor wild thing of the hills
with this my bow. I shall myself in death
be a feast for those that fed me. Those that I hunted
shall be my hunters now.
Life for the life I took, I shall repay
at the hands of this man that seemed to know no harm.

960

My curse upon your life!—but not yet still
until I know if you will change again;
if you will not, may an evil death be yours!

Chorus

What shall we do? Shall we sail? Shall we do as he asks?
Prince, it is you must decide.

Neoptolemus

A kind of compassion,
a terrible compassion, has come upon me
for him. I have felt for him all the time.

Philoctetes

Pity me, boy, by the Gods; do not bring on yourself
men's blame for your crafty victory over me.

Neoptolemus

What shall I do? I would I had never left
Scyrus, so hateful is what I face now.

970

Philoctetes

You are not bad yourself; by bad men's teaching
you came to practice your foul lesson. Leave it to others
such as it suits, and sail away. Give me my arms.

Neoptolemus

What shall we do, men?

(*Odysseus appears.*)

Odysseus

Scoundrel, what are you doing? Give me those arms.

Philoctetes

Who is this? Is that Odysseus' voice?

Odysseus

It is.

Odysseus certainly; you can see him here.

Philoctetes

Then I have been sold indeed; I am lost. It was he
who took me prisoner, robbed me of my arms

Odysseus

Yes, I, I and no other. I admit that.

980

Philoctetes

Boy, give me back my bow, give it back to me.

Odysseus

That he will never
be able to do now, even if he wishes it.
And you must come with the bow, or these will
bring you.

Philoctetes

Your wickedness and impudence are without limit.
Will these men bring me, then, against my will?

Odysseus

Yes, if you do not come with a good grace.

Philoctetes

O land of Lemnos and all mastering brightness,
Hephaestus-fashioned, must I indeed bear this,
that he, Odysseus, drags me from you with violence?

Odysseus

It is Zeus, I would have you know, Zeus this land's ruler,
who has determined. I am only his servant.

990

Philoctetes

Hateful creature,
what things you can invent! You plead the Gods
to screen your actions and make the Gods out liars.

Odysseus

They speak the truth The road must be traveled.

Philoctetes

I say No.

Odysseus

I say Yes. You must listen.

Philoctetes

Are we slaves and not free? Is it as such
our fathers have begotten us?

Odysseus

No, but as equals
of the best, with whom it is destined you must take Troy,
dig her down stone by stone.

Philoctetes

Never, I would rather suffer anything than this.
There is still my steep and rugged precipice here.

1000

Odysseus

What do you mean to do?

Philoctetes

Throw myself down,
shatter my head upon the rock below.

Odysseus

Hold him. Take this solution out of his power.

Philoctetes

Hands of mine, quarry of Odysseus' hunting,
now suffer in your lack of the loved bowstring!

You who have never had a healthy thought
nor noble, you Odysseus, how you have hunted me,
how you have stolen upon me with this boy

as your shield, because I did not know him, one
that is no mate for you but worthy of me,
who knows nothing but to do what he was bidden, 1010
and now, you see, is suffering bitterly
for his own faults and what he brought on me.
Your shabby, slit-eyed soul taught him step by step
to be clever in mischief against his nature and will.
Now it is my turn, now to my sorrow you have me
bound hand and foot, intend to take me away,
away from this shore on which you cast me once
without friends or comrades or city, a dead man among the living.

My curse on you! I have often cursed you before,
but the Gods give me nothing that is sweet to me. 1020
You have joy to be alive, and I have sorrow
because my very life is linked to this pain,
laughed at by you and your two generals,
the sons of Atreus whom you serve in this.
And yet, when you sailed with them, it was by constraint
and trickery, while I came of my own free will
with seven ships, to my undoing, I
whom they dishonored and cast away—
you say it was they that did it and they you.

But now why are you taking me? For what?
I am nothing now. To you all I have long been dead. 1030
God-hated wretch, how is it that now I am not
lame and foul-smelling? How can you burn your sacrifice
to God if I sail with you? Pour your libations?
This was your excuse for casting me away.

May death in ugly form come on you! It will so come,
for you have wronged me, if the Gods care for justice.
And I know that they do care for it, for at present
you never would have sailed here for my sake
and my happiness, had not the goad of God,

a need of me, compelled you.
 Land of my fathers, Gods that look on men's deeds,
 take vengeance on these men, in your own good time,
 upon them all, if you have pity on me!
 Wretchedly as I live, if I saw them
 dead, I could dream that I was free of my sickness

1040

Chorus

He is a hard man, Odysseus, this stranger,
 and hard his words: no yielding to suffering in them

Odysseus

If I had the time, I have much I could say to him.
 As it is, there is only one thing As the occasion
 demands, such a one am I.
 When there is a competition of men just and good,
 you will find none more scrupulous than myself.
 What I seek in everything is to win
 except in your regard: I willingly yield to you now.

1050

Let him go, men. Do not lay a finger on him.
 Let him stay here. We have these arms of yours
 and do not need you, Philoctetes.
 Teucer is with us who has the skill and I,
 who, I think, am no meaner master of them
 and have as straight an aim. Why do we need you?
 Farewell: pace Lemnos. Let us go. Perhaps
 your prize will bring me the honor you should have had.

1060

Philoctetes

What shall I do? Will you appear
 before the Argives in the glory of my arms?

Odysseus

Say nothing further to me. I am going.

Philoctetes

Your voice has no word for me, son of Achilles?
 Will you go away in silence?

Odysseus

Come, Neoptolemus.

Do not look at him. Your generosity
may spoil our future.

Philoctetes

You, too, men, will you go
and leave me alone? Do you, too, have no pity?

1070

Chorus

This young man is our captain. What he says to you
we say as well.

Neoptolemus (to the Chorus)

Odysseus will tell me
that I am full of pity for him. Still
remain, if he will have it so, as long
as it takes the sailors to ready the tackle
and until we have made our prayer to the Gods.
Perhaps, in the meantime, he will have better thoughts
about us. Let us go, Odysseus.

You, when we call you, be quick to come.

1080

(Exeunt Odysseus and Neoptolemus.)

Philoctetes

Hollow in the rock, hollow cave, sun-warmed, ice cold,
I was not destined, after all, ever to leave you.
Still with me, you shall be witness to my dying.
Passageway, crowded with my cries of pain,
what shall be, now again, my daily life with you?
What hope shall I find of food to keep my wretched life alive?
Above me, in the clouds, down the shrill winds
the birds; no strength in me to stop them.

1090

Chorus

It was you who doomed yourself,
man of hard fortune. From no other,
from nothing stronger, came your mischance.
When you could have chosen wisdom,

with better opportunity before you,
you chose the worse

1100

Philoctetes

Sorrow, sorrow is mine. Suffering has broken me,
who must live henceforth alone from all the world,
must live here and die here;
no longer bringing home food nor winning
it with strong hands. Unmarked, the crafty words
of a treacherous heart stole on me Would I might see him,
contriver of this trap,
for as long as I am, condemned to pain.

1110

Chorus

It was the will of the Gods
that has subdued you, no craft
to which my hand was lent.
Turn your hate, your ill-omened curses, elsewhere.
This indeed lies near my heart,
that you should not reject my friendship.

1120

Philoctetes

By the shore of the gray sea he sits and laughs at me.
He brandishes in his hand the weapon which kept me alive,
which no one else had handled. Bow that I loved,
forged from the hands that loved you, if you could feel,
you would see me with pity, successor to Heracles,
that used you and shall handle you no more.
You have found a new master, a man of craft, and shall be bent
by him.
You shall see crooked deceits and the face of my hateful foe,
and a thousand ill things such as he contrived against me.

1130

Chorus

A man should give careful heed to say what is just;
and when he has said it, restrain his tongue from rancor and taunt.
Odysseus was one man, appointed by many,
by their command he has done this, a service to his friends.

1140

Philoctetes

Birds my victims, tribes of bright-eyed wild creatures,
tenants of these hills, you need not flee from me or my house.

No more the strength of my hands, of my bow, is mine.

1150

Come! It is a good time

to glut yourselves freely on my discolored flesh.

For shortly I shall die here. How shall I find means of life?

Who can live on air without any of all that life-giving earth supplies?

1160

Chorus

In the name of the gods, if there is anything that you hold in respect,

draw near to a friend that approaches you in all sincerity.

Know what you are doing, know it well.

It lies with you to avoid your doom.

It is a destiny pitiable to feed

with your body. It cannot learn how

to endure the thousand burdens with which it is coupled.

Philoctetes

Again, again you have touched my old hurt,

1170

for all that you are the best of those that came here.

Why did you afflict me? What have you done to me?

Chorus

What do you mean by this?

Philoctetes

Yes, you have hoped to bring me

to the hateful land of Troy

Chorus

I judge that to be best.

Philoctetes

Then leave me now at once.

Chorus

Glad news, glad news.

I am right willing to obey you.

Let us go now to our places in the ship.

1180

Philoctetes

No, by the God that listens to curses, do not go,
I beseech you.

Chorus

Be calm!

Philoctetes

Friends, stay!

I beg you to stay.

Chorus

Why do you call on us?

Philoctetes

It is the God, the God. I am destroyed.
My foot, what shall I do with this foot of mine
in the life I shall live hereafter?
Friends, come to me again

1190

Chorus

What to do that is different
from the tenor of your former bidding?

Philoctetes

It is no occasion for anger
when a man crazy with storms of sorrow
speaks against his better judgment.

Chorus

Unhappy man, come with us, as we say.

Philoctetes

Never, never! That is my fixed purpose.
Not though the Lord of the Lightning, bearing his fiery bolts,
come against me, burning me
with flame and glare.
Let Ilium go down and all that under its walls
had the heart to cast me away, crippled!
Friends, grant me one prayer only.

1200

Chorus

What is it you would seek?

Philoctetes

A sword, if you have got one,
or an ax or some weapon—give it me!

Chorus

What would you do with it?

Philoctetes

Head and foot,
head and foot, all of me, I would cut with my own hand.
My mind is set on death, on death, I tell you.

Chorus

Why this?

1210

Philoctetes

I would go seek my father.

Chorus

Where?

Philoctetes

In the house of death.
He is no longer in the light.
City of my fathers, would I could see you.
I who left your holy streams,
to go help the Greeks, my enemies,
and now am nothing any more.

Chorus

I should have been by now on my way to the ship,
did I not see Odysseus coming here
and with him Neoptolemus.

1220

(*Enter Odysseus and Neoptolemus in front of the cave, talking.
Philoctetes withdraws into the cave.*)

Odysseus (to Neoptolemus)

You have turned back, there is hurry in your step.
Will you not tell me why?

Neoptolemus

I go to undo the wrong that I have done.

Odysseus

A strange thing to say! What wrong was that?

Neoptolemus

I did wrong when I obeyed you and the Greeks.

Odysseus

What did we make you do that was unworthy?

Neoptolemus

I practiced craft and treachery with success.

Odysseus

On whom? Would you do some rash thing now?

Neoptolemus

Nothing rash. I am going to give something back.

1230

Odysseus

What? I am afraid to hear what you will say

Neoptolemus

Back to the man I took it from, this bow.

Odysseus

You cannot mean you are going to give it back.

Neoptolemus

Just that. To my shame, unjustly, I obtained it.

Odysseus

Can you mean this in earnest?

Neoptolemus

Yes, unless

it is not in earnest to tell you the truth.

Odysseus

What do you mean, Neoptolemus, what are you saying?

Neoptolemus

Must I tell you the same story twice or thrice?

Odysseus

I should prefer not to have heard it once.

Neoptolemus

You can rest easy. You have now heard everything.

1240

Odysseus

Then there is someone who will prevent its execution.

Neoptolemus

Who will that be?

Odysseus

The whole assembly
of the Greeks and among them I myself.

Neoptolemus

You are a clever man, Odysseus, but
this is not a clever saying.

Odysseus

In your own case
neither the words nor the acts are clever.

Neoptolemus

Still
if they are just, they are better than clever.

Odysseus

How can it be just to give to him again
what you won by my plans?

Neoptolemus

It was a sin,
a shameful sin, which I shall try to retrieve.

Odysseus

Have you no fear of the Greeks if you do this?

1250

Neoptolemus

I have no fear of anything you can do,
when I act with justice; nor shall I yield to force.

Odysseus

Then we shall fight
not with the Trojans but with you.

Neoptolemus

Let that be as it will.

Odysseus

Do you see my hand,
reaching for the sword?

Neoptolemus

You shall see me do as much
and that at once.

Odysseus

I will let you alone;
I shall go and tell this to the assembled Greeks,
and they will punish you.

Neoptolemus

That is very prudent
If you are always as prudent as this,
perhaps you will keep out of trouble

1260

(Exit Odysseus.)

I call on you, Philoctetes, son of Poias,
come from your cave.

(Philoctetes appears at the mouth of the cave.)

Philoctetes

What cry is this at the door?
Why do you call me forth, friends? What would you have?
Ah! This is a bad thing. Can there be some fresh mischief
you come to do, to top what you have done?

Neoptolemus

Be easy. I would only have you listen.

Philoctetes

I am afraid of that.
I heard you before, and they were good words, too.
But they destroyed me when I listened.

Neoptolemus

Is there no place, then, for repentance?

1270

Philoctetes

You were just such a one in words when you stole my bow,
inspiring confidence, but sly and treacherous.

Neoptolemus

I am not such now But I would hear from you
whether you are entirely determined
to remain here, or will you go with us?

Philoctetes

Oh, stop! You need not say another word
All that you say will be wasted.

Neoptolemus

You are determined?

Philoctetes

More than words can declare

Neoptolemus

I wish that I could have persuaded you.
If I cannot speak to some purpose, I have done.

Philoctetes

You will say it all
to no purpose, for you will never win my heart
to friendship with you, who have stolen my life
by treachery, and then came and preached to me,
bad son of a noble father. Cursed be you all,
first the two sons of Atreus, then Odysseus,
and then yourself!

1280

Neoptolemus

Do not curse me any more.
Take your bow. Here I give it to you.

Philoctetes

What can you mean? Is this another trick?

Neoptolemus

No. That I swear by the holy majesty
of Zeus on high!

Philoctetes

These are good words,
if only they are honest.

1290

Neoptolemus

The fact is plain.
Stretch out your hand; take your own bow again.

(*Odysseus appears.*)

Odysseus

I forbid it, as the Gods are my witnesses,
in the name of the Atridae and the Greeks.

Philoctetes

Whose voice is that, boy? Is it Odysseus?

Odysseus

Himself and near at hand.
And I shall bring you to the plains of Troy
in your despite, whether Achilles' son
will have it so or not.

Philoctetes

You will rue your word
if this arrow flies straight.

Neoptolemus

No, Philoctetes, no!

1300

Do not shoot.

Philoctetes

Let me go, let go my hand, dear boy.

Neoptolemus

I will not.

(*Exit Odysseus.*)

Philoctetes

Why did you prevent me killing my enemy,
with my bow, a man that hates me?

Neoptolemus

This is not to our glory, neither yours nor mine.

Philoctetes

Well, know this much, that the princes of the army,
the lying heralds of the Greeks, are cowards
when they meet the spear, however keen in words.

Neoptolemus

Let that be. You have your bow. There is no further cause
for anger or reproach against me.

Philoctetes

None.

You have shown your nature and true breeding,
son of Achilles and not Sisyphus.
Your father, when he still was with the living,
was the most famous of them, as now he is of the dead.

1310

Neoptolemus

I am happy to hear you speak well of my father
and of myself. Now listen to my request.
The fortunes that the Gods give to us men
we must bear under necessity
But men that cling wilfully to their sufferings
as you do, no one may forgive nor pity.
Your anger has made a savage of you. You will not
accept advice, although the friend advises
in pure goodheartedness. You loathe him, think
he is your enemy and hates you.
Yet I will speak. May Zeus, the God of Oaths,
be my witness! Mark it, Philoctetes, write it in your mind.
You are sick and the pain of the sickness is of God's sending
because you approached the Guardian of Chryse,
the serpent that with secret watch protects
her roofless shrine to keep it from violation.
You will never know relief while the selfsame sun
rises before you here, sets there again,
until you come of your own will to Troy,
and meet among us the Asclepiadae,

1320

1330

who will relieve your sickness; then with the bow
and by my side, you will become Troy's conqueror.

I will tell you how I know that this is so.
There was a man of Troy who was taken prisoner,
Helenus, a good prophet. He told us clearly
how it should be and said, besides, that all Troy
must fall this summer. He said, "If I prove wrong
you may kill me."

1340

Now since you know this, yield and be gracious.
It is a glorious heightening of gain.
First, to come into hands that can heal you,
and then be judged pre-eminent among the Greeks,
winning the highest renown among them, taking
Troy that has cost infinity of tears.

Philoctetes

Hateful life, why should I still be alive and seeing?

Why not be gone to the dark?

What shall I do? How can I distrust

1350

his words who in friendship has counseled me?

Shall I then yield? If I do so, how come

before the eyes of men so miserable?

Who will say word of greeting to me?

Eyes of mine, that have seen all, can you endure

to see me living with my murderers,

the sons of Atreus? With cursed Odysseus?

It is not the sting of wrongs past

but what I must look for in wrongs to come.

Men whose wit has been mother of villainy once

1360

have learned from it to be evil in all things.

I must indeed wonder at yourself in this.

You should not yourself be going to Troy

but rather hold me back. They have done you wrong

and robbed you of your father's arms. Will you go and help them

fight and compel me to the like?

No, boy, no; take me home as you promised.

Remain in Scyrus yourself; let these bad men
die in their own bad fashion. We shall both thank you,
I and your father. You will not then, by helping
the wicked, seem to be like them

1370

Neoptolemus

What you say
is reasonable; yet I wish that you would trust
the Gods, my word, and, with me as friend, fare forth.

Philoctetes

What, to the plains of Troy, to the cursed sons
of Atreus with this suffering foot of mine?

Neoptolemus

To those that shall give you redress,
that shall save you and your rotting foot from its disease.

Philoctetes

Giver of dread advice, what have you said!

1380

Neoptolemus

What I see fulfilled will be best for you and me.

Philoctetes

And saying it, do you not blush before God?

Neoptolemus

Why should one feel ashamed to do good to another?

Philoctetes

Is the good for the Atridae or for me?

Neoptolemus

I am your friend, and the word I speak is friendly.

Philoctetes

How, then, do you wish to betray me to my enemies?

Neoptolemus

Sir, learn not to be defiant in misfortune.

Philoctetes

You will ruin me, I know it by your words.

Neoptolemus

Not I. You do not understand, I think.

Philoctetes

Do I not know the Atridae cast me away?

1390

Neoptolemus

They cast you away; will, now again, restore you.

Philoctetes

Never, if of my will I must see Troy.

Neoptolemus

What shall we do, since I cannot convince you
of anything I say? It is easiest for me
to leave my argument, and you to live,
as you are living, with no hope of cure.

Philoctetes

Let me suffer what I must suffer.

But what you promised to me and touched my hand,
to bring me home, fulfil it for me, boy.

Do not delay, do not speak again of Troy

1400

I have had enough of sorrow and lamentation.

Neoptolemus

If you will then, let us go.

Philoctetes

Noble is the word you spoke.

Neoptolemus

Brace yourself, stand firm on your feet.

Philoctetes

To the limit of my strength.

Neoptolemus

How shall I avoid the blame of the Greeks?

Philoctetes

Give it no thought.

Neoptolemus

What if they come and harry my country?

Philoctetes

I shall be there.

Neoptolemus

What help will you be able to give me?

Philoctetes

With the bow of Heracles.

Neoptolemus

Will you?

Philoctetes

I shall drive them from it.

Neoptolemus

If you will do what you say,
come now; kiss this ground farewell, and come with me.

(Heracles appears standing on the rocks above the cave of Philoctetes.)

Heracles

Not yet, not until you have heard
my words, son of Poias.

I am the voice of Heracles in your ears;

1410

I am the shape of Heracles before you.

It is to serve you I come and leave my home among the dead.

I come

to tell you of the plans of Zeus for you,

to turn you back from the road you go upon.

Hearken to my words.

Let me reveal to you my own story first,
let me show the tasks and sufferings that were mine,
and, at the last, the winning of deathless merit.

1420

All this you can see in me now.

All this must be your suffering too,

the winning of a life to an end in glory,

out of this suffering. Go with this man to Troy.

First, you shall find there the cure of your cruel sickness,
and then be adjudged best warrior among the Greeks.
Paris, the cause of all this evil, you shall kill
with the bow that was mine. Troy you shall take.
You shall win the prize of valor from the army
and shall send the spoils to your home,
to your father Poias, and the land of your fathers, Oeta
From the spoils of the campaign you must dedicate
some, on my pyre, in memory of my bow. 1430

Son of Achilles, I have the same words for you.
You shall not have the strength to capture Troy
without this man, nor he without you,
but, like twin lions hunting together,
he shall guard you, you him I shall send Asclepius
to Ilium to heal his sickness. Twice
must Ilium fall to my bow. But this remember,
when you shall come to sack that town, keep holy in the sight of
God. 1440

All else our father Zeus thinks of less moment.
Holiness does not die with the men that die.
Whether they die or live, it cannot perish.

Philoctetes

Voice that stirs my yearning when I hear,
form lost for so long,
I shall not disobey.

Neoptolemus

Nor I.

Heracles

Do not tarry then.
Season and the tide are hastening you on your way. 1450

Philoctetes

Lemnos, I call upon you:
Farewell, cave that shared my watches,
nymphs of the meadow and the stream,

the deep male growl of the sea-lashed headland
where often, in my niche within the rock,
my head was wet with fine spray,
where many a time in answer to my crying
in the storm of my sorrow the Hermes mountain sent its echo! 1460
Now springs and Lycian well, I am leaving you,
leaving you.

I had never hoped for this.
Farewell Lemnos, sea-encircled,
blame me not but send me on my way
with a fair voyage to where a great destiny
carries me, and the judgment of friends and the all-conquering
Spirit who has brought this to pass.

Chorus

Let us go all
when we have prayed to the nymphs of the sea 1470
to bring us safe to our homes. 1471